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Experiences and Perspectives of Practitioners in Culturally Diverse Early Childhood Education and Care Centres in Ireland

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*Experiences and perspectives of practitioners in culturally diverse
early childhood education and care centres in Ireland*

Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Erasmus
Mundus joint degree “International Master of Early Childhood Education and
Care”

Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences

Dublin Institute of Technology

University of Gothenburg

University of Malta

August 2014





DECLARATION

I hereby certify that the material which is submitted in this thesis towards the award of the Masters in Early Childhood Education and Care is entirely my own work and has not been submitted for any academic assessment other than part-fulfilment of the award named above.

Signature of candidate:

A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of a stylized 'S' followed by a large, looping '8'.

August 2014

ABSTRACT

Early childhood care and education (ECCE) settings in Ireland have become increasingly multicultural. While policy documents and curricular guidelines for ECCE in Ireland emphasize the importance of addressing diversity and equality issues, implementation of culturally relevant practices may vary according to practitioners' skills, knowledge, perspectives and previous experiences with cultural diversity. The purpose of the study was to represent variety of perspectives that practitioners might hold regarding cultural diversity in ECCE. It represents an exploratory study of four practitioners' perspectives and experiences of cultural diversity in two multicultural ECCE settings in Dublin, Ireland. Phenomenological methodology was applied to the study to generate rich data on various issues related to the research questions. In-depth interviews and observations were chosen as methods for data collection. The findings of the study suggest that practitioners hold variety of perspectives on cultural diversity, its relevance to ECCE and young children's lives and appropriate activities for exploring culture related topics with children. Practitioners identified language related issues as the key challenge when working in culturally diverse ECCE communities. They critically approached available multicultural resources, but did not feel confident to bring forth change. Overall, evidence from this small scale study suggests that practitioners value cultural diversity and in general terms most of them acknowledge importance of addressing culture related issues in early childhood; however they might lack confidence, skills and knowledge to address issues in everyday practice and engage in an open dialogue with families. These findings have implications for policy and professional education programs regarding the needs to be addressed in pre and in service training programs for practitioners.

Keywords: cultural diversity, practitioners' perspectives, diversity and equality in early childhood

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LIST OF USED ACRONYMS

CECDE- Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education

DECET- Diversity in Early Childhood Education and Training

EACEA - Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency

ECCE- Early Childhood Care and Education

ECEC- Early Childhood Education and Care

FETAC- Further Education and Training Awards Council

NCCA- National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

NCCRI- National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism

OECD- Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development

UNESCO- United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

UNCRC - United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

UNICEF – United Nations Children’s Fund

USA- United States of America

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1. Context

Understanding cultural diversity and building culturally sensitive practices has become one of the central issues pertinent to the diversity and equality agenda at all levels of education, including early childhood education and care. Increasing number of immigrants in European countries throughout the last few decades has given further urgency to the need for more effective and just education provision for all children (EACEA, 2009). Ireland has been no exception in this regard. While historically being home to communities that differed culturally (for example, Irish settlers and Irish Travellers), within the last two decades Ireland has become increasingly multicultural, hosting immigrants from various countries (OECD, 2009). In this context, the government has shown commitment to valuing diversity and supporting equality in the ECCE sector in Ireland. The key documents and guidelines relating to ECCE that have been developed within the last fifteen years all address the critical importance of diversity issues in early childhood. These documents, including the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009), quality standards *Síolta* (CECDE & Department of Education and Skills, 2006) and Diversity and Equality Guidelines for Childcare Providers and Practitioners (Office of the Minister for Children, 2006), embrace diversity and emphasize the critical importance of supporting each child's identity and sense of belonging. These principles necessitate ECCE practices that are sensitive to the needs of children and families from various cultural backgrounds and identify the need for relevant day-to-day responses to the issues that might arise in culturally diverse ECCE contexts. Indeed practitioners play a central role in this process. Educators' knowledge, skills and perspectives on diversity are critically important factors that shape practice within culturally diverse educational settings (Clarke & Drudy, 2006). As there are no minimum qualifications required for early childhood practitioners in Ireland there may be great variance among practitioners in their understandings and approaches for addressing cultural diversity issues in ECCE practice (Moloney, 2010). In addition to skills and knowledge, subjective perspectives on cultural diversity and different cultures are also important as diversity may be experienced differently by each individual (DECET, 2004).

1.2. Rationale

Focus on cultural diversity issues and its relevance to early childhood education stems from the researcher's academic interests and work experience. The researcher's interest in the area emerged from her experience of working with ethnic minority children and families in Georgia and her own experiences of residing as a foreign national in several European countries. Further acquaintance with theoretical and research literature on diversity and equality in early childhood has led the researcher to believe in the critical importance of the topic from a social justice perspective.

Several arguments underscore the need for exploring ECCE practitioners' perspectives and experiences of cultural diversity. Firstly, policy level documents in Ireland and research literature acknowledge the importance of culturally meaningful and sensitive practices to ensure positive and supportive experiences for all children in ECCE settings (NCCA, 2009; CECDE & Department of Education and Skills, 2006; Brooker, 2005; Robinson & Jones Diaz, 2006). While policy level perspectives are crucial for determining the direction of approaches to cultural diversity, practitioners' play a key role in enacting ECCE practices in day to day life. Thus, in order to better understand how approaches purveyed in curriculum and policy documents are translated into practice, it is important to explore practitioners' views and personal experiences of cultural diversity in ECCE settings.

Various qualitative and quantitative studies carried out in the Irish context provide evidence that there might be a wide spectrum of views and perspectives on cultural diversity among practitioners (Murray & Urban, 2012; Duffy & Gibbs, 2014). For example, a mixed method evaluation study of a training programme on supporting education of minority groups in ECCE in County Clare (Ireland), provides evidence that practitioners' perspectives and their practice might differ significantly depending on their training on the related issues (Duffy & Gibbs, 2014).

This research explored practitioners' perspectives and experiences giving due regard to the meanings and understandings practitioners ascribed to various issues concerning the topic of cultural diversity in ECCE settings. By studying practitioners' voices the research attempts to shed light on some issues that might arise in culturally diverse ECCE communities in Ireland.

Some postcolonial and poststructuralist critical theorists have argued that dominant discourses or 'truths' governing the field of early childhood have marginalized early childhood practitioners' voices (Cannella, 1997; Grieshaber & Cannella, 2001; Bloch, 2000; Adair & Tobin, 2008). Increasing cultural diversity in Ireland may be posing a variety of personal, professional and institutional challenges to individual practitioners and their views and tactics to address these issues may differ and should be taken into account while forming policy and training strategies. Within poststructural feminist perspective, Robinson and Jones Diaz (2006) describe individuals as operating within socially and culturally available discourses; however individuals are also considered as active agents able to bring forth views that may challenge dominant constructions and ideas in any given social area. The study of practitioners' views and experiences will enrich the existing literature on how professional or institutional expectations are negotiated by personal beliefs and experiences of practitioners.

In depth study of practitioners' perspectives will facilitate the identification of the needs that they prioritize to be addressed in this area. Practitioners' views, along with the parents' and children's perspectives, are critical for developing ethical practice in ECCE that embraces negotiation and participatory principles (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999).

Finally, studies of practitioners' perspectives on cultural diversity are important to understand how they relate their own identities to the culturally diverse communities (Robinson & Jones Diaz, 2006). Based on practitioners' unique experiences and identities, their views and understandings of cultural diversity and various issues related to it might be different from the currently prevalent views in academic or policy discourse (Grieshaber & Cannella, 2001).

Studies of practitioners' perspectives on cultural diversity can create the research base which can inform ECCE centre management, policymakers and teacher trainers regarding the needs and challenges that may be faced by practitioners working in ECCE.

1.3. Research aim, objective and questions

The aim of the study is to explore practitioners' experiences and perspectives on cultural diversity in ECCE.

The research objectives are:

- To contribute to the research literature in cultural diversity by giving voice to ECCE practitioners;
- To explore practitioners' views and perspectives on cultural diversity by examining their experience, challenges and opportunities they have encountered in culturally diverse ECCE settings.

The research attempts to answer the following questions:

- How do practitioners understand cultural diversity within the ECCE context?
- What are practitioners' experiences related to their work in culturally diverse ECCE settings?
- How do practitioners view their role as members of a culturally diverse ECCE community?
- What are the needs and challenges that practitioners identify in relation to cultural diversity?

1.4. Method

Based on the research aim and questions a qualitative approach to the study was identified as the most appropriate. It represents an exploratory study of four practitioners' perspectives and experiences in two ECCE settings in Dublin, Ireland. Phenomenological methodology was applied to the study to generate rich data on the depth of practitioners' perspectives on various issues related to the research questions. In-depth interviews and observations were chosen as methods for data collection. As the research aim was to study practitioners' perspectives and views of their own experience, most data came from the interviews. Nevertheless, three hour observations in each practitioner's class were carried out before the interviews to help the researcher familiarize with general preschool activities and the preschool environment. Semi-structured interviews with practitioners were carried out to ensure that participants' views were heard on various pertinent themes identified in advance and to allow for topics that were not considered by the researcher to emerge during the interviews.

Ethical aspects relevant to the study were considered and addressed in accordance with DIT Research ethics guidelines. Necessary steps have been taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity of the research participants. These issues are addressed in further detail in Chapter 3.

1.5. Thesis outline

This thesis includes six chapters. The first chapter introduces the context, rationale and short description of research methods. Research aim and questions are also articulated within the first chapter.

Relevant theoretical, policy and research literature is reviewed in the second chapter organized in several related themes. The first section of the chapter presents the concept of culture and defines cultural diversity from postcolonial and other critical theoretical perspectives. The section that follows aims to identify increasing diversity patterns across the world and in Ireland. The chapter presents a discussion of various approaches and the theoretical underpinnings that have been applied to address cultural diversity in ECCE. Further, the discussion is extended to include the review of current policy, curriculum and research literature in Ireland. The chapter concludes with a review of evidence from some recent research that aimed to study practitioners' perspectives or experience of cultural diversity.

The third chapter discusses in detail the research methodology and the procedures taken during the planning and implementation process. The chapter presents a justification for the selected methodology and methods in relation to the research questions. A description of the applied sampling strategies and the sample are also discussed in detail in the chapter. Separate sections discuss ethical considerations, quality and the limitations of the study.

The fourth chapter sets the context for the findings by providing description of the preschool settings where the research was carried out and short background information about each participant of the study.

The fifth chapter presents key findings and discusses them within the context of existing literature. Findings and discussion are presented according to the eight main themes identified from the generated data.

The sixth chapter represents a concluding narrative, summarizing the research and the main findings while presenting recommendations for further studies in the area.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Introduction

The following chapter aims to provide a review of literature relevant to the research including theoretical, policy and research literature. The chapter presents general debates in the field and locates them within the Irish context. The following two sections of the chapter discuss concepts of culture and cultural diversity from postcolonial and other critical theoretical perspectives. The fourth section of the chapter presents a review of cultural diversity in Ireland and summarizes literature on how cultural diversity and minorities have been constructed in Irish society. Debates and approaches to cultural diversity in ECCE, including the Irish context are discussed in the fifth and the sixth sections of the chapter. The final section discusses findings and evidence from similar studies in Ireland as well as other countries.

2.2. Defining culture

Culture is a complex construct that has been defined in many ways across the different disciplines and theories (Parekh, 2006; Lott, 2010). Definitions range from very specific to more broader understandings of culture. Despite the ambiguity around the concept, most contemporary definitions in social sciences share the idea that culture is a set of “socially transmitted beliefs, values and practices... (and) shared ideas and habits” of a group of people (Latane, 1996, as cited in Lott, 2010, p. 11). Popular views of culture sometimes have reduced these beliefs and practices to specific aspects of culture such as festivals, food, clothing, etc.; however culture in social sciences is understood as a rather complex notion which implies a set of shared values and behaviours within a group that are learned by the new members of a group (Parekh, 2006). Often culture is discussed in relation to ethnic groups, however a more general approach to culture claims that the term may be applied to any group with shared values and patterns of behaviour (Lott, 2010). Both learning and sharing are thought of as essential components of culture (Swartz, 2001, as cited in Lott, 2010, p. 13). Culture is conceptualized as a critical aspect of human life, through which individuals become socialized, construct identity and a sense of belonging (Parekh, 2006).

Lott (2010) discusses culture as the lens through which humans interpret their experience, often without being aware of it. Cultural norms within a group may be perceived as natural. Often

awareness of these norms occurs when different cultural norms are encountered. As Lott (2010) puts it, “culture is lived and only sometimes scrutinized or described by those who live it” (p.12).

Culture may often be misrepresented as a set of customs, traditions and beliefs that remain unaltered from generation to generation. Due to its social nature, culture cannot be static; it experiences change over time as new circumstances arise (Rogoff, 2003). Despite its commonality to the members of the group, culture of the group cannot necessarily be deduced to the values and behaviours of any given individual in the group. Essentialist notions of culture imply ascribing perceived group characteristics to individuals. From a poststructural feminist theoretical perspective Robinson and Jones Diaz (2006) argue that cultural identities of groups are heterogeneous and constantly evolving.

Cultures are also influenced by interactions with other cultures thus leading to change in both majority and minority cultures (Parekh, 2006, Cannella & Viruru, 2004). Post-colonialist cultural theorists have also argued that cultural boundaries are impossible to be delineated and cannot be accurate reflections of complex reality (Cannella & Viruru, 2004; Bhabha, 1994).

Individual differences create some variance within certain boundaries of the given culture. Stereotypes or unjustified assumptions about group cultures are often deduced to its individual members. Most contemporary social theories stress human agency and view individuals as active members of a group (Lott, 2010). Cultures are not uniform; cultural norms are experienced and negotiated by individuals in somewhat different ways (Parekh, 2006, Robinson & Jones Diaz, 2006). Rogoff (2003) argues that there is a reciprocal interrelationship between the individual and the group culture, each contributing and being affected by the other (Rogoff, 2003). Critical psychologists argue that identities of individuals are formed within their communities and cultures and it would be a mistake to assume that their identities develop independently of the politics and power relationships embedded in the culture of their and other groups (Lott, 2010).

2.3. Increasing diversity

OECD data on immigrant and foreign populations show the gradual increase of foreign-born and foreign populations in virtually all western industrialized countries over the last two decades (OECD, 2013). Ireland is no exception in regards to this trend: the foreign born population in 2000 comprised 8.7% of the total population and increased to 15.5% in 2010 (OECD, 2013).

Ireland along with other western countries is becoming increasingly multicultural. In multicultural societies multiple values and ways of living may coexist alongside each other. Groups may use different language, have various life-styles, employ different child-rearing practices, have different expectations at different developmental stages of children, assume different gender roles, etc. (Parekh, 2006; Rogoff, 2003).

It is a widespread assumption that the European nation-states have been culturally and ethnically homogenous upon their creation (Vandenbroeck, 2007; Hayes, 2006). However, the myth of monoculture does not reflect the reality, and historical evidence suggests that this myth is indicative of the dominance of majority cultures that have dominated at the expense of silencing minority groups (Robinson & Jones Diaz, 2006; Vandenbroeck, 2007; Murray & Urban, 2012; Hayes, 2006). Vandenbroeck (2007) argues that the very idea of uniform ethnicity and culture that was the fundamental basis for the creation of the European nation-states, marginalized those who did not fit within the proposed 'norms' of majority culture. This served as an ideological basis for alienating those who were perceived as different or '*other*'. Often minority cultures have been perceived by the dominating groups as less 'legitimate', 'undeveloped' or 'abnormal' (Cannella & Viruru, 2004; Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999). Distance between the 'us' of majority and 'them' of minority was often perpetuated by prejudices held against the minority cultures. Prejudices in turn, often served to justify discrimination against the minority groups and their individual members (Vandenbroeck, 2007; Hayes, 2006). Discrimination implies unequal treatment of individuals based on their group membership (Pincus, 2006). Pincus (2006) summarizes three types of discrimination that may be faced by individuals or groups: individual, institutional and structural. Discriminatory incidences by group members towards members of other groups can be categorized as individual discrimination. An example of individual discrimination could be a case, where a school principal denies access to an immigrant child because of the child's poor knowledge of the local language. Institutional discrimination includes the policies, legal frameworks as well as the system that implements these policies and laws, intended to be harmful to certain groups. Structural discrimination, on the other hand, includes the policies and legal frameworks that do not intend to harm, but due to the existing realities end up having harmful effects on some groups of people (Pincus, 2006).

Individual and structural discrimination may still be prevalent issues in society even when at the state level institutional discrimination and inequalities are reduced. Bias and prejudice may be

hard to change as they are embedded in discourses that may have dominated the majority's perception of the 'other' for a long period. Foucault's works on discourse provides a critical framework for understanding the mechanisms underpinning the interrelationship of discourse and power. Concepts and the theories developed by Foucault based on his elaborative *genealogical* studies of different topics, have been applied to the field of education, including early childhood education, by many researchers (MacNaughton, 2005; Cannella, 1997; Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999; Grieshaber & Cannella, 2001). Foucault (2000) theorizes discourse as a complex set of symbolic representations and meanings that are usually taken for granted and rarely questioned. Discourses set the boundaries of what can be considered as the 'norm' and respectively 'deviation' within a given society, thus privileging some groups within the 'norm'. Discourses, as defined by Foucault (2000), reinforce and sustain power inequalities among different groups. However, Foucault viewed power as an unfixed, constantly negotiated aspect of all human interactions. In this respect, within a post-structural perspective, challenging taken-for-granted discourses has been viewed as an initial step to understanding and addressing inequality issues that persist in different social areas today (Robinson & Jones Diaz, 2006).

2.4. Cultural diversity in Ireland

2.4.1. Immigrant population

Having a long history of outward migration, with many Irish forced to leave their country due to different social, economic and political reasons, Ireland has become the destination for many immigrants in the last two decades (OECD, 2009). The economic boom and an increased demand for labour force between 2000 and 2008 in Ireland attracted immigrants of various nationalities. According to the statistical data in 2006 immigrants in Ireland were nationals of 188 different countries (OECD, 2009, p. 16). According to 2011 Census, 17% of the population in Ireland was born outside Ireland (Central Statistics Office & Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, 2014). Immigrant populations come from several countries, for example England and Wales (4.69% of the total population in Ireland), Poland (2.55%), Lithuania (0.77%), Nigeria (0.44%), Romania (0.4%) and others (ibid.).

Based on a review of Irish emigration history and anti-Irish prejudice and discrimination experienced by Irish emigrants in other countries, Murray and Urban (2012) argue that it would

be reasonable to assume, that because of the history the locals today would empathize with immigrants moving to Ireland. However, available data on the instances of discrimination and racism in Ireland suggest that discrimination does happen in Ireland (NCCRI, 2008). Despite this, racism as an existing problem has been often denied in Ireland (Hayes, 2006; O'Connell, 2002). In response to the reports on racism and discrimination a new discourse has emerged that racism in Ireland was triggered by the increasing number of immigrants and refugees within the last decade. However historical evidence suggests that racism is not a recent phenomenon in Irish society. In addition to anti-Irish racism prevalent under English colonisation, minorities such as Irish Travellers have been subject to discrimination. According to Lentin and McVeigh (2002) racism has been often ignored as a social and political issue in Ireland and regarded as a matter of personal beliefs and attitudes, neglecting the discriminatory practices and policies these beliefs and prejudices have often lead to. Lentin (2007) analyzes immigration and asylum policies in Ireland including the Citizenship Referendum of 2004, which removed the right to citizenship to children born in Ireland to migrant parents. She argues that the state has played a critical role in the construction of racism in Ireland.

2.4.2. Irish Travellers

Along with various cultural backgrounds of immigrants, Irish Traveller culture represents an important part of Ireland's cultural diversity. According to the 2011 Census, population of Irish Travellers amounted to 29,500, comprising 0.7 % of the total population (Central Statistics Office & Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, 2014).

Irish Travellers have been part of Irish society for hundreds of years. In historical sources they first appear in the 12th century (Hayes, 2006). Hayes (2006) discusses in detail the ardent debate, mostly among scholars on the ethnogenesis of Travellers. He argues that the dominant conceptualizations of the birth of the Traveller community even today have carried assumptions that have been applied to justify the assimilation and discriminatory practice towards the group. These theories have viewed Travellers as previously settlers, who were forced to start a nomadic lifestyle due to reasons such as economic conditions, colonization, or social disgrace. In this way representing Travellers as victims has led to policies that intended forced assimilation of the group into the mainstream culture (Hayes, 2006). Hayes (2006) argues that the ways in which the majority or the settled community in Ireland has categorized Travellers has created a discourse

where Travellers were conceptualized as the ‘other’. The key cultural difference lies in the nomadic lifestyle of the Travellers. Nomadic groups such as Travellers and Roma have been perceived as a threat to the existing cultural order (Hayes, 2006). John O’Connell (2002) argues that even though it has been widely acknowledged in Irish society that Travellers have been the most disadvantaged group in social areas including health, education, gender equality, living conditions, poverty, social exclusion, etc., society and the state has persistently denied that marginalization and disadvantage could be caused by the persisting prejudices and discrimination against Travellers.

It has been debated whether the Irish Travellers should be given the status of a minority ethnic group in Ireland. Pavee Point, a Traveller and Roma Centre based in Dublin, has advocated for recognition of Travellers as an ethnic minority group, suggesting that the group meets the criteria of the ethnicity definition and it would be a positive step towards the recognition and respect of the group (Pavee Point, 2013). Ethnicity is a complex construct and its interpretation has varied through the social science disciplines. How ethnicity will be defined has an implication on which groups will be categorized as ethnic ones. A social-constructionist approach holds that ethnic groups share common culture and are ‘largely biologically self-perpetuating’ (Hayes, 2006, p. 27). Whether recognized as a separate ethnic group or not, it is clear that Irish Travellers have a shared culture and lifestyle that significantly differs from the majority culture (Hayes, 2006).

2.5. Cultural diversity in ECCE

2.5.1. Relevance of cultural diversity to ECCE

Addressing cultural diversity in education springs up from the social justice perspective, which argues for respect of all cultures, including those that are different from the dominant cultures in a given society (Ang, 2010). The importance of inclusion of ethnic minority children in ECEC has been emphasized at a policy level in many European countries. It has been viewed as a window of opportunity for addressing social and cultural inequalities from the earliest stage (EACEA, 2009). Affordability and access to ECEC services is identified as a major issue for many minority groups in Europe (ibid.). Drawing on the research evidence, the EACEA (2009) report states that to close the education gap between different groups of children, governments need to ensure that disadvantaged children have access to quality ECEC. This involves

improving access and quality of service provision, creating better conditions for parental leave and raising public awareness of the importance of early years (ibid.).

Increasing access to ECEC for minority groups has to be accompanied by culturally responsive educational and caring environments that will support each child's identity, development and sense of belonging in the setting. Woodhead and Brooker (2008) outline the importance of sense of belonging in the development of children. While most children will have a strong sense of belonging within their family and community, for some, for example, those with different cultural backgrounds this may be challenged when they enter early education and care settings (ibid.). Woodhead and Brooker (2008) apply Bourdieu's framework of cultural and social reproduction to shed light on how the existing culture in ECEC settings may undermine confidence and a sense of belonging among some children. Based on the analysis of the French educational system, Bourdieu argued that educational institutions are constructed around middle class cultural norms, which advantage those children, whose families hold and transmit the relevant cultural capital to the offspring and disadvantage others, who do not fit within the preferred modes of behaviour and learning (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). From Bourdieu's theoretical perspective, by prioritizing and encouraging certain behaviour, knowledge and skills that children bring with them to educational settings, the culture of children from minority groups will not be validated and furthermore will be represented as having a lesser value (Adair & Tobin, 2008). This might undermine children's sense of belonging in the school as well as their appreciation of their own cultural identity. Contemporary life-style for most children in European countries implies multiple belongings to different settings that may have differing cultures such as families, ECCE settings, playgroups, etc. Thomas (2012) applies Honneth's theory of recognition to young children's participation, emphasizing 'love, rights, and solidarity' to be critical for children to participate in any social setting. Woodhead and Brooker (2008) also find Honneth's theory useful in understanding how different levels of recognition, including affection, legal rights and community approval are crucially important for supporting children's identity and belonging in educational settings.

2.5.2. Cultural Diversity: From an assimilationist approach to anti-bias and beyond

Within the last three decades approaches to diversity in education in Europe have changed significantly. It would be unrealistic to argue that in practice ECCE settings or individual

practitioners follow any single approach. Rather, research evidence from different countries suggests that practitioners usually employ different approaches, though some might be more dominant (Vandenbroeck, 2007; Stier, Tryggvason, Sandström & Sandberg, 2012). However, changes in approaches may be more visible in the policies governing the education sector.

An assimilationist approach to diversity, dominant before the 1970's, viewed cultural diversity as problematic or an obstacle to development and encouraged minority cultures to assimilate into the majority culture and accept the dominant 'norms' (Murray & O'Doherty, 2001). The assimilationist perspective viewed minority cultures as 'deficient' and often perceived them as a threat to the 'normal' society. These views may be linked to the positivist modernist thought of single truth deducible to certain ways of living and knowing the world that are supreme to others (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999). Multiculturalism or cultural pluralism challenged assimilationist approaches by seeking acknowledgement and respect for different minority cultures in their own right. Even though multiculturalism embraced the liberal pluralist perspective of respecting minority cultures, majority culture remained as an unquestioned norm (Ang, 2010). Multiculturalism was thought to be an important step forward after the assimilationist approach, nevertheless it failed to challenge existing inequalities and discourses and practices that perpetuated them. It was criticized for neglecting power relations that existed between the majority and minority cultures and for reducing minority cultures to only 'celebratory' aspects of culture such as festivals, food, clothes, etc. (Derman-Sparks and the ABC Task Force, 1989). Based on these criticisms, a new approach of *intercultural* education emerged. Along with the importance of knowing and respecting minority cultures it aimed to address the implicit power inequalities by challenging the norms that benefited some groups while disadvantaging others. Inequality and discrimination was no longer viewed as a minority issue but a majority issue as well. This meant challenging the idea that the causes of inequalities and disadvantages experienced by minorities lay within the minority cultures. Rather, the intercultural approach envisioned questioning majority cultures to address structural inequalities in education (Murray & O'Doherty, 2001). The discourse of intercultural education aimed for a critical social undertaking where members of the majority culture were to examine and challenge prejudices and biases that prevailed in dominant discourses. It should be noted that similar critical approaches in some research and academic literature, particularly those of US origin, are often referred to as Multiculturalist or Critical Multiculturalist approach, while the term

Multiculturalist approach in a European context has been used to denote a liberal pluralist approach described above (Murray & O'Doherty, 2001).

Based on the key principles of the intercultural approach Derman-Sparks and the ABC Task Force (1989) developed the *Anti-bias approach* for early childhood education in the US. However, the new approach included all minority groups, along with cultural minorities. The Anti-bias approach views children from an early age as active meaning-makers and agents who learn about the surrounding norms and prejudices through socialization, but with the right support of adults they may be equipped to critically think and challenge attitudes and practices that are harmful or unjust to themselves and/or others (Derman-Sparks and the ABC Task Force, 1989). The anti-bias approach has been widely popular and successfully adopted in many western countries and beyond (e.g., Gramelt, 2013; Vajda, 2001, Vandebroek, 2007; Murray, 2012). Current approaches to diversity in early childhood in Ireland are also largely informed by the principles and ideas of the anti-bias approach (Murray & O'Doherty, 2001; Office of the Minister for Children, 2006).

However certain criticisms of the anti-bias approach have been made by early childhood researchers from Europe and Australia. Vandebroek (2007) questions universal applicability of all aspects of the anti-bias approach to European countries, where for example, ethnicity and culture may not be 'visible' or easily identified and reflected in the environment and curriculum. Thinking from a post-structuralist perspective, Vandebroek argues, that the concept of 'pre-prejudices' and the importance of unlearning them in an anti-bias curriculum may create yet another developmental milestone, that may neglect or misinterpret the present lived experiences of children (ibid.). Australian based researchers, Robinson and Jones Diaz (2006) argue that the anti-bias approach refers to different minority identities (e.g., gender, culture, disability, ethnicity, etc.) as simply accumulating disadvantages and runs the risk of neglecting the lived realities that are created by the complex interrelationships of these identities.

2.6. Diversity and equality in ECCE in Ireland

The ECCE system in Ireland has experienced many changes within the last ten years. An OECD country note on ECCE in Ireland in 2004 reviewed the Irish ECCE system and identified multiple issues that had to be addressed by the state, including improving the quality of ECCE

services and access for Traveller and disadvantaged groups (OECD, 2004). Even though there is much left for improvement, the Irish government has made important steps towards building a stronger ECCE system with clearer supportive and regulatory frameworks. In 2006 the government issued *Child Care (Pre-school Services) Regulations* (Department of Health and Children, 2006) which set out health and safety requirements to be met by childcare providers. In addition, the document included a small paragraph on supporting children's identities as an important part of the 'whole child perspective' used as a framework for the document:

The diversity of children's experiences, culture, gender, social background and traditions should be nurtured and valued by the service provider. The provider and staff must actively promote equality of opportunity, participation and anti-discriminatory practice with regard to all children in their care. This includes the promotion of mutual respect between children in their care (p. 69).

Significant investments were made in the ECCE sector as part of the National Childcare Strategy 2006-2010, that set out goals to improve access to ECCE services by increasing the number of places, improving access for disadvantaged children and supporting childcare providers in improving the quality of the services (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2006).

The government has also developed two important documents that aim to improve the quality of ECCE services in Ireland: *Síolta*- the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and *Aistear*- the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (CECDE & Department of Education and Skills, 2006; NCCA, 2009). It is notable that both *Síolta* and *Aistear* present equality and diversity as one of the core principles of ECCE. However, neither of these documents is mandatory for ECCE centres. *Síolta*, introduced in 2006, includes sixteen standards of quality for ECCE providers. The fourteenth standard *Identity and Belonging* is specifically concerned with supporting individual and group identity of all children in diverse settings. Equality and respect for diversity are emphasized to be the crucial principles of quality care and education that ensures access to meaningful and respectful early childhood education services for every child to help them develop their unique capabilities (CECDE & Department of Education and Skills, 2006).

Aistear, introduced in 2009, is built upon four themes of early learning and development (NCCA, 2009). Identity and belonging appear as one of the four key themes of the curriculum

framework, emphasizing its overarching importance for children's development through all activities and interactions in ECCE.

As part of the National Childcare Strategy, Diversity and Equality Guidelines for Childcare Providers were developed (Office of the Minister for Children, 2006). The guidelines are based on key principles of the anti-bias approach. They acknowledge research evidence that children may develop biases and prejudices at a very young age and underscore the important role of ECCE practitioners and service providers in empowering children to challenge these biases and be comfortable with difference. The guidelines present diversity and equality as an integral and continuing part of quality ECCE (Office of the Minister for Children, 2006). The guidelines set forth four anti-bias goals for children and adults:

Children:

- *To support children's identity and sense of belonging*
- *To support children to become comfortable with difference*
- *To foster each child's critical thinking about bias*
- *To empower children to stand up for themselves and others in the face of bias*

Adults:

- *To be conscious of one's own culture, attitudes and values and how they influence practice*
- *To be comfortable with difference, engage effectively with families*
- *To critically think about bias and discrimination*
- *To confidently engage in dialogue around issues of bias and discrimination (p. 9).*

The Guidelines emphasize the importance of collaborating with families and the need to acknowledge and respect for cultural differences about child-rearing practices, views on what constitutes quality early childhood, etc.

Alongside these recent policy and curriculum developments on diversity and equality issue discussed above, the *Eist Project*, originating in 1998 has made an important contribution to the diversity and equality education of ECCE practitioners and trainers in Ireland, as well as advocating for social justice and equality education in early childhood (Murray & O'Doherty, 2001).

In 2009, the government introduced the Free Pre-school Year (FPY) scheme, which finances one year in a pre-school programme for every child between the ages of 3 years and 2 months and 4 years and 7 months, in the year before they enter the primary school. As a consequence of the scheme, there has been a dramatic increase in the enrolment rates to ECCE in Ireland. Even

though enrolment is still voluntary, in 2011/2012 94% of children within the eligible age range were enrolled in the FPY scheme (Department of Education and Skills, 2014). An OECD Review of Migrant Education in Ireland (2009) viewed FPY as an important initiative to reduce access barriers in ECCE for minority groups and underlined the importance of ensuring the diverse needs of children be met in ECCE settings.

As a result of almost universal enrolment in the FPY scheme, ECCE practitioners may now be working in a more culturally diverse context than ever before. Even though quality standards, curriculum framework and the diversity and equality guidelines discussed above, all set a sound framework for implementing culturally enriched and sensitive ECCE programmes, whether practitioners are equipped with skills and knowledge and ready to follow this agenda remains to be seen. It is the responsibility of practitioners to make unique and culturally sensitive decisions in everyday practice (Ang, 2010). In a review of ECCE policy development in Ireland, Moloney (2010) argues that ambitious policy agendas have been made, however questions arise regarding the possibilities to meet the objectives of newly developed strategies and visions for ECCE with practitioners and managers who are largely untrained. Research carried out by the Department of Education and Skills in Ireland (2013) aimed to assess the implementation of *Siolta* in ECCE settings. The study identified that the *Siolta* standard that targets supporting each child's and families cultural, linguistic and personal identity and sense of belonging, was among those standards with the lowest validation rates by external evaluators. Neylon's (2014) quantitative study of twenty-six Irish ECCE centres using standardized quality assessment tools provides evidence that on average centres did not meet the minimum standard of ECERS-E regarding various aspects of diversity, including planning for individual learning needs and gender and race equality and awareness.

2.7. Practitioners' experiences and perspectives on cultural diversity

The following section focuses on ECCE practitioners' role in culturally diverse communities as envisioned from a social justice perspective. Furthermore the section draws some of the key themes that have emerged from different studies of practitioners' experiences and perspectives of working with cultural diversity.

ECCE practitioners have a unique position that allows them to contribute to building a more socially just society (Robinson & Jones Diaz, 2006). The language they use, their behaviour,

what they teach and how they teach it can challenge discourses and taken-for-granted norms that might be disempowering or discriminating some children and families. However such efforts are not always easy to make in real life situations. Fennimore (2007) identifies multiple factors that may affect ECCE practitioners' ability and willingness to counteract biased attitudes and practices in diverse ECCE contexts. Awareness and reflection over one's own attitudes and biases, structural inequalities that may be hard for an individual to struggle against, the level of comfort that other teachers may have developed with the biased and unjust practices and the risks that may be associated with raising a voice over sensitive diversity issues are some of the important obstacles to realizing the social justice endeavours of ECCE practitioners (Fennimore, 2007). Fennimore suggests the need for practitioners to acknowledge these difficulties and at the same time retain the attitude of advocacy for all children (ibid.). She identifies important steps to following the ethical practice for diversity, such as understanding the issue well, exploring best options to solve the issue in the best interest of the child and choosing an action plan after acknowledging the possible difficulties and outcomes. Openness and respect for different ideas of colleagues and families is also an important component on the journey to ethical practice (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999). Along with interactions between adults and adults and children in ECCE, the importance of the physical environment that reflects cultural diversity has been widely recognized in curriculum, policy and research literature (e.g., Derman-Sparks & the ABC Task Force, 1989; Murray & Urban, 2012; Patterson & Bigler, 2006; Aboud, 2003; Office of the Minister for Children, 2006). The presence of non-stereotypic, realistic images, toys, books, art materials, etc. that represent different cultures of children enrolled in the ECCE setting and their appropriate use is viewed as critical for validating minority culture and supporting each child's identity and sense of belonging (Derman-Sparks & the ABC Task Force, 1989; Murray & Urban, 2012).

DECET, representing a European network that supports spreading the principles of diversity and equality in early childhood education in nine countries, including Ireland, has identified the following five key competences for ECCE practitioners that are necessary to ensure better opportunities for all children:

- *Working towards social change*
- *Open communication and dialogue*
- *Critical reflection: exploring complex issues from various angles*
- *Learning from disagreements*

- *Co-constructing new practice and knowledge with children, parents and colleagues.* (DECET, 2011).

Studies of teacher's experiences of working with cultural diversity have demonstrated that teachers often hold the view that young children do not have prejudices (or pre-prejudices) against other children based on culture, ethnicity or other characteristics, leading them to believe that raising issues beyond cultural celebrations, food, clothes etc. is not appropriate for young children (Robinson & Jones Diaz, 2006, Berthelsen & Karuppiyah, 2011). Such views have been influential in early childhood practice. Derman-Sparks labelled it as a 'tourist approach' to cultural diversity, where only 'touristic' aspects of culture are explored and often in stereotypical ways, lacking cultural meaningfulness for the groups they are intended to represent (Derman-Sparks & the ABC Task Force, 1989). Emphasis on the above mentioned aspects of culture runs the risk of reducing individual families to the stereotypes that may not hold true for everyone. It may ignore complex and constantly negotiated aspects of cultural and social identities of different groups (Robinson & Jones Diaz, 2006). In addition, some studies have found that practitioners' views of cultural diversity and its relevance may be limited to the differences that are more visible, for example skin colour, which might neglect significant cultural variation within the group (Berthelsen & Karuppiyah, 2011, Robinson & Jones Diaz, 2006).

In Singapore, a study of 48 ECCE practitioners' perspectives on cultural diversity in ECCE identified their need for more in-depth knowledge about multicultural education in general and knowledge about other cultures (Berthelsen & Karuppiyah, 2011). The study showed that teachers in general regarded multiculturalism as an important area of early childhood, however they expressed little knowledge or self-reflection over meeting the challenges of cultural diversity in everyday life (ibid.). Only a few participants (four out of 48) briefly mentioned the teacher's own biases, however they did not elaborate on ways to address the issue.

Based on an analysis of cultural diversity issues raised in ECCE policy and practice in England, Ang (2010) concludes that instead of providing practitioners with detailed guidelines and rules they should be empowered to be able to creatively respond to challenges and opportunities that arise in culturally diverse ECCE community contexts. Critical reflection and reflective practice is centrally positioned in the Irish approach to diversity and equality (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2006; Murray and Urban, 2012). Similarly, Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (1999) question the applicability of universal approaches in ECCE and argue for the need of

practitioners to think and act locally and contextually when encountering the difference (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999).

Gramelt (2013) discusses the *Kinderwelten* project in Germany that introduced the anti-bias approach in German kindergartens since 2000. Based on expert interviews with project associates as well as teacher trainers, Gramelt identifies some beliefs common among many practitioners before introducing the anti-bias approach. Many practitioners thought that there was no necessity to bring diversity issues to the attention of young children; that all children are the same, and that they (practitioners) naturally treat them equally. However, as the evidence suggests, when the practitioners were given the opportunity to reflect on their practice by viewing photos and watching video records of their practice, they started to challenge and critically view previously held beliefs.

Murray's (2012) qualitative study involving participant classroom observations and in-depth interviews with ten practitioners in South African ECCE centres provides similar evidence. Murray classified her findings into two types of practice, a tourist approach, where 'celebratory' and stereotypic aspects of culture were presented and reinforced, and a 'laissez-faire' approach, which viewed children as insufficiently mature to hold biases and thus declined the importance of addressing diversity issues in ECCE. For example, six out of ten practitioners in the study expressed beliefs that issues regarding cultural or racial discrimination had no relevance for children in ECCE (Murray, 2012). Murray found that in those cases, where cultural diversity was addressed in practice, for e.g. during celebration of cultural festivals, they usually presented cultures stereotypically. On the other hand participants, in line with other studies (e.g. Berthelsen & Karuppiyah, 2011; Loveridge, Rosewarne, Shuker, Barker, & Nager, 2012) emphasized the importance of encouraging respect for diversity and empathic relationships in a post-apartheid society still struggling with issues of bias and discrimination. Murray also presented some cases where practitioners had to work with some parents' racist attitudes such as telling a child not to play with 'certain' children or pulling out child from ECCE settings because of its ethnic composition. This could be an example of pro-active action by ECCE practitioners to reduce taken for granted prejudice and discrimination towards some groups. All participants brought up language and culture-based communication problems with families, which in some cases they attempted to resolve by different strategies, such as home visits. Some practitioners emphasized

the importance of materials in the classroom that would represent children's diverse cultures in order to support their sense of belonging.

Research evidence from studies of practitioners' experiences in different countries suggests that cultural misunderstandings between families and ECCE settings can be reduced and used as instances for strengthening positive relationships when the settings employ an open and respectful communicative practice towards all families (Sier et al., 2012; Loveridge et al., 2012).

Practitioners' perspectives on cultural diversity might differ depending on their previous experience with children and families with various cultural backgrounds and also their belonging to a majority or ethnic minority group. For example, two case studies of ECCE centres in New Zealand provide evidence on how practitioners' approach to diversity might differ depending on practitioners' length of experience of working in culturally diverse environments and the practitioners' own identities (being an ethnic minority) (Loveridge et al., 2012). In addition, the study found that even though both settings were committed to respecting and valuing cultural diversity, practice in one of the settings was still dominated by *white*, middle-class cultural norms (ibid.).

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Introduction

The following chapter presents the research methodology and methods applied in the study. The chapter includes a justification for the selected methods, detailed description of the procedures involved in data generation and analysis. Issues of quality and the limitations of the study are also discussed in detail. The chapter concludes with a presentation of the ethical issues that were addressed as part of the study.

The research methodology is designed to address the following research questions:

1. How do practitioners understand cultural diversity within ECCE context?
2. What are practitioners experiences related to their work in culturally diverse ECCE settings?
3. How do practitioners view their role as members of culturally diverse ECCE community?
4. What are the needs and challenges that practitioners identify in relation to cultural diversity?

3.2. Paradigm, methodology and methods

In accordance with the research questions the proposed research employed a qualitative design. It is positioned within an interpretive paradigm and represents a phenomenological study as it focuses on gaining an understanding of ECCE practitioners' experiences, views and interpretations on the topic of interest (Flick, 2009). A phenomenological approach assumes the centrality of subjective experiences of the research participants and interprets them as real and legitimate for describing realities as experienced by these individuals (Titchen & Hobson, 2005). The study employed what is known as *direct approach* from a phenomenological sociological perspective rooted in Husserl's philosophical framework, later elaborated and applied to research methodology by Schutz (Titchen & Hobson, 2005). It implies studying phenomenon by directly investigating participants' conscious reflection and meaning making of the phenomenon traditionally using in depth interviews (Titchen & Hobson, 2005). This perspective stands in opposition to *indirect approach*, which assumes the study of lived experience by immersing the

researcher in the participant's actual setting. *Indirect approach* seeks to elucidate pre-cognitive, not acknowledged realities that shape participants' experiences (Titchen & Hobson, 2005). Accordingly semi-structured interviewing was identified as a key method for the data generation in this study. However, to ensure richness of data, observation was employed as another method (Mills, 2014). Based on a review of the research literature, Mills (2014) argues in favour of using multiple methods in qualitative research to ensure that data on participants' expressed perspectives are complemented with data on relevant actual life occurrences and environments. As suggested by Titchen and Hobson (2005), within the phenomenological methodological framework, the study used observations as a method to:

- Generate data on the general environment where practitioners' experiences with cultural diversity in ECCE are shaped;
- Create a shared experience and equip the researcher with some knowledge about the setting that could be used to meaningfully appropriate the interview guide for the given context;
- Facilitate the researcher's understanding of participants' perspectives shared during the interview.

In phenomenology direct approach implies a detached researcher who attempts to abandon the pre-conceived notions and be open to the participants shared perspectives. However the possibility of a detached researcher has been widely questioned in qualitative research methodology literature as it is hardly conceivable to hold a completely value-free disinterested stance when the researcher's own perspectives are shaped by previous knowledge and engagement with the issue under study. To ensure continuous reflexivity over such possible biases, the need for the researcher's own subjectivities to be scrutinized has been emphasized manifold (Birks, 2014^a). To this end, a reflexive diary was kept throughout the research process which facilitated questioning and reframing some of the implicit ideas held by the researcher.

3.3. Sample

Within the limited timeframe of the research project, a small sample size of four practitioners was identified for the study. Purposive and convenience sampling methods were used to recruit the participants. A purposive sampling strategy was selected to ensure that participants could

share their perspectives based on their experience of working in culturally diverse ECCE settings for at least one year. A convenience sampling strategy was used to ensure accessibility to the ECCE centres within the timeframe for the research project (Flick, 2009).

After consulting with researchers who had previously worked with multicultural ECCE centres in Dublin, two preschools were purposefully selected based on the richness of cultural diversity represented within the settings. Preschool A was located in inner city Dublin in a relatively disadvantaged area. Approximately one-third of children enrolled in Preschool A were children of immigrants from various countries of Europe, Asia and Africa. Preschool B was located in a disadvantaged area of Dublin, remotely from the city centre. Irish Traveller children and immigrant children comprised almost 30% of children enrolled in the preschool. In addition to the purposive selection, the preschools' openness and previous involvement in research projects was taken into account for convenience. At the first stage, preschool principals were contacted by phone and later in person by the researcher. They were given detailed information about the study. Both preschools agreed to participate and the principals willingly suggested some of the practitioners whose experience with cultural diversity would contribute significantly to the study. The practitioners were given detailed information about the study and their rights as a participant (discussed in further detail under the section *Ethical considerations*). Two practitioners in each preschool agreed to participate. As the research aimed to elucidate practitioners' experiences of cultural diversity in ECCE, only practitioners with at least one year of relevant experience were offered to participate.

3.4. Data generation

For the purpose of gaining an understanding of practitioners' views and experiences of cultural diversity, data was generated from classroom participant observations and semi-structured in-depth interviews with practitioners. As suggested above, the two methods were selected to complement and enrich and enhance the quality of the overall data collected. In the observations the researcher positioned herself as *observer as participant*, allowing her to observe the environment and activities relevant to the research question in a limited time-frame and upon the consent of the participants (Mukherji & Albon, 2010). The semi-structured interviews enabled the researcher to focus the data gathering process on general themes within the research topic and at the same time left opportunities for the participants to share a variety of views that were

meaningful to them (Cannold, 2001). Observation and interview guides were developed based on the themes prevalent in the theoretical and research literature. The observation guide included different aspects of environment, interactions and activities that were informed by the anti-bias approach, *Siolta* and some studies discussed in literature review section (Derman-Sparks and the ABC Task Force, 1989; CECDE & Department of Education and Skills, 2009; Murray, 2012; Loveridge et al., 2012). The following main themes were included in the observation guide: visual images (such as photographs, paintings, posters, etc), toys and materials (books, dolls, art materials, toys and materials for dramatic play, any materials related to language and music, manipulative toys, etc.), use of culture related resources in the activities, presence of culture related themes in the activities, interactions between practitioners and children from various cultural backgrounds (Appendix 9).

Open-ended questions were developed as part of an interview guide (Appendix 8). According to Cannold (2001) open-ended questions give participants the option to provide a variety of responses, and sometimes even to change questions, that may carry the misinterpretations or biases of the researcher. The interview guide included nine open-ended questions under the three basic themes: (a) challenges and/or opportunities that practitioners have encountered within the culturally diverse ECEC context, (b) practitioners' ways of addressing cultural diversity issues, (c) practitioners' views and perspectives towards cultural diversity. Additionally some guiding probing questions were identified under each question.

Both guides were piloted to ensure the relevance of the identified topics, issues and questions to the context similar to that of the participants. Piloting of the instruments was carried out after the ethical approval of the research was received from the Head of School of Languages, Law and Society in DIT.

The observation guide was piloted in a preschool classroom of 3 to 4 year old children. The researcher was an employee in the preschool and at the time of piloting had been working in the preschool for three months as an afterschool assistant. Permission for piloting the guide was asked from the preschool principal and practitioners in the classroom. Information on the aim of the research and piloting was shared and the researcher explained that no data acquired in the pilot study would be used in the research. Children were familiar with the researcher, hence were comfortable with the researcher's presence in the classroom and actively communicated with her.

Overall some minor changes were made to the observation guide. Even though situations for most items on the interaction list did not come up during the three hour observation, most items were not omitted as were considered important for the research if such instances would be observed. The piloting was useful for rethinking procedures related to observation. Firstly, some culturally relevant materials could have been kept in places that were not visible in a specific moment of observation. Thus asking practitioners questions where possible was identified as a helpful strategy to gather more comprehensive data. The presence or absence of culturally relevant materials or images in a specific moment could be largely due to the philosophy and pedagogical practice followed in a preschool. The presence of culturally rich materials in the classroom is still treated as important to cultural diversity in ECCE, but the researcher acknowledged that considering the pedagogical approach or philosophy could contribute significantly to the interpretation of the data. The setting where the observation guide was piloted followed the Montessori curriculum. The classroom was equipped with Montessori materials and even though many cultural resources were available in the preschool they were kept in a separate room and according to the practitioner they were occasionally brought to the classroom. Another important issue that came up during the piloting procedure was the need to have some information about the cultural backgrounds of the children before the start of observation. In such cases, the observation data of interaction and activities would be richer. Additionally, it would decrease the risk of observing cultural diversity within the limits of ‘visible’ differences. Based on the outcomes of piloting only minor adjustments were made in the observation guide and procedures on fieldwork were slightly rethought.

The interview guide was also piloted with a practitioner who had experience of working in a multicultural ECCE centre for three years. Minor changes were made to the interview guide, including rephrasing one question to a more general one and adding some possible probing questions if the themes came up in the responses of the participants.

After the slight modifications of the instruments, data was generated in two stages with each participating practitioner. The first stage involved three to four hours of participant observation of daily activities, routines and environment in the practitioner’s class. In all classes observations were carried out between 9 am and 1 pm and no changes or adjustments were made in the planned activities because of the presence of the researcher in the classroom. The researcher throughout the observation time shifted her roles from an active participant to a more passive

observer depending on the suitability of engagement in the specific activities children were involved in. Observation notes were taken following the observation guide.

After the observations a short break was taken, between 30 to 60 minutes. The break was used by the researcher to review the observation notes and identify some of the issues for reflection during the second stage. The break was followed by the second stage of data generation, which involved in-depth interviews with the practitioners. The participants chose the interview and observation time and were given an option to be interviewed either at the preschool or at the university. The interviews took place either in the practitioner's classroom, when all children and other staff were gone, or in a different classroom/office. On average the interviews lasted 35 to 40 minutes and were guided by pre-determined questions in the interview guide (Appendix 8). In addition to the questions identified in the interview guide other questions arose during the interview process as a follow-up to participants' responses and probing questions were used for clarification, examples and for exploring issues in further depth. The interviews with the permission of the participants were audio recorded and transcribed within a week of the interview.

In each preschool data generation with two practitioners took place over two consecutive days. However due to the two weeks of Easter holidays data generation in one preschool took place before the holidays and in another setting, after the holidays. The time between the two phases was used to explore and get familiar with data from the observation notes and interview transcripts from the first preschool.

3.5. Data analysis

The observation notes were typed up and audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis and interpretation of the acquired data was conducted in several stages. Initially observation notes and interview transcripts were read several times to get familiar with the data. While familiarizing with the data, notes were taken on all emerging topics and quotes that were considered to be relevant to the practitioners' experiences of various issues related to cultural diversity. As suggested by Usher and Jackson (2014), while revisiting the data, the researcher made efforts to open up to other possible meanings that could be ascribed to the data. Thematic coding was chosen to categorize data according to the predetermined themes of

interest related to the research questions (Flick, 2009). More specific concepts were organized under broader themes. As suggested by Flick (2009), each case was reread and viewed under the predetermined codes separately, which allowed for adjustment of the codes based on their relevance and importance.

3.6. Quality and limitations of the study

To ensure quality of the research the CASP (Critical Appraisal Skills Program) tool was used in the planning and implementation of the research (CASP, 2013). In the discussion of qualitative research rigour and trustworthiness Birks (2014^b) suggests the use of the user-friendly CASP tool by less experienced qualitative researchers.

The CASP tool is constructed around ten general themes that qualitative researcher needs to address to ensure quality and rigour of the study. Each theme is supported with relevant questions to facilitate the application of the theme to the study. All themes were considered in the process of implementation of this study and are either discussed in further detail below or in respective sections of this chapter. The themes include: articulation of research aims and appropriateness of qualitative methodology and research design, relevance of sampling strategies to the aims of the research, position of the researcher, ethical considerations, the value of the study, credibility and articulation of findings, etc. (CASP, 2013).

Trustworthiness and credibility of the study has been addressed by thorough selection of the methods and related procedures, detailed note-taking and scrupulous assessment of the process, triangulation of methods (observation and interview) and regular peer debriefing on issues where there were risks for potential biased interpretations. Flick (2009) argues that reliability in qualitative research is concerned with two main issues: making it possible to delineate participants' views from those of the researcher's interpretations and ensuring systematic and thorough approach in application of the research methods (Flick, 2009). To address these issues, reliability of interpretation of data was constantly rechecked in relation to other pieces of data within the same interview and observation dataset. To illustrate findings, quotes are often used to present participants' actual voice in the midst of interpretation. The data has been approached several times in order to avoid exclusion of the data that did not seem to fit in or contradicted general findings.

It should be noted that as the research was based on a small sample size, the data and its analysis are only reflective of views and experiences of the participating practitioners. A larger sample would have allowed for richer data and more diverse experiences and perspectives to be heard. However, the sample size had to be determined according to the limited timeframe assigned for the research. Despite this limitation, the study provides important insights into cultural diversity issues in ECCE settings as experienced by some practitioners in Dublin preschools.

A reflective diary was kept throughout the study. Birks (2014^a) suggests that being reflexive is an important part of qualitative research allowing for critical awareness of the researcher's own subjectivities and reducing their impact on data generation and interpretation. The position of a researcher and power relations between the researcher and the participants was carefully examined throughout the process to ensure sensitivity towards participants' needs. When introducing herself to the participants, the researcher shared general background information about herself as a student at DIT and was open to respond to further questions if practitioners inquired.

3.7. Ethical considerations

Ethical issues were considered and addressed at each stage of the research, including planning, data gathering and analysis and reporting. The research was guided by the DIT Research Ethics Guidelines (Dublin Institute of Technology, 2014) and the Policy statement on ensuring research integrity in Ireland (Irish Universities Association, 2013). The DIT ethics forms were completed, including the following:

- Ethics form on subjects and/or researchers (Appendix 6)
- Participant consent form (Appendix 3)
- Consent form for research involving 'less powerful' subjects or those under 18 (Appendix 5)
- Fieldwork risk assessment form (Appendix 7).

Information letters were drafted for gatekeepers (principals of the ECCE centres), practitioners and parents (Appendices 1, 2 and 4 respectively). They included information about the study, confidentiality and contact details of the researcher and the research supervisor from DIT. The letters, ethics forms and the research proposal were submitted for ethical approval to the Head of

the School of Languages, Law and Society in DIT. The research project was approved without any suggestions for modification. Garda clearance was obtained beforehand and presented to the principals upon request. Participants were provided with the information letters after the principals agreed the study to be carried out in their centre. The letters for practitioners included information about the aim and methods of the study, confidentiality issues and the rights of participants to withdraw from the study at any point without giving a reason and without affecting their future relationship with DIT.

The data generated during the observations and interviews was stored securely in a personal computer of the researcher, treated confidentially and will be destroyed after the official evaluation of the thesis. The transcriptions of audio recordings of the interviews were emailed to participants for review. They were given an opportunity to review the contents of the transcript to ensure their perspectives and views were accurately represented in the transcript. Three out of four participants made minor changes in respective interview transcripts. All changes either concerned restructuring a sentence to make the meaning clearer or omitting words to reduce redundancy.

The names of all individuals and places have been changed to ensure anonymity and to reduce the risk of making individual participants identifiable.

DIT consent forms were provided to the participants to be signed. In addition to the information sheet, the researcher also explained the content of the research and participant rights before the data generation. The participants were given the opportunity to ask questions regarding any aspect of the study. One of the practitioners initiated email communication with the researcher to request further information about the procedures involved and was given detailed relevant information.

As the research included classroom observations, ethical considerations were given to informing parents and children in the classrooms of the participating practitioners. The aim of the observation was to gather data from the classroom environment and activities that were relevant to cultural diversity and they focused only on activities and environment, not individual children's behaviour. Parent information sheets were provided to the school principals who delivered them to the parents with the help of practitioners. The information was given to each parent of the children in respective classes, explaining the goals and procedures of the study and

the researcher's presence in the classroom. Practitioners were kindly asked to follow up with parents to ensure that they received the information sheet. They were also asked to orally deliver the information to parents, in the event of possible literacy issues among some immigrant or Traveller parents. Parents were asked to notify the ECCE practitioner or the researcher if they did not wish the child to participate in the study, in which case the activities or interactions of the specific child would not be observed by the researcher. However no parent objected to participation in the study. Before the observation, the practitioners introduced the researcher to the children and explained the reason for the researcher's presence. Children were asked if they thought it was ok for the researcher to watch them play and take a look at their toys and books. None of the children objected.

CHAPTER 4: SETTING THE CONTEXT

4.1. Introduction

The following chapter presents the context in which the study took place. It is assumed that the immediate environment where participants experience cultural diversity is likely to contribute to shaping their perspectives about different issues related to cultural diversity in early childhood. Curriculum, environment and activities in two preschools are discussed in detail to set the context for presenting findings of the study. Most information presented in this chapter was gathered through observations, however, some issues, were clarified during the interviews. Various characteristics of the preschools are discussed in terms of their relevance to cultural diversity. Some similarities and differences between two preschools are identified throughout the chapter. The second section of the chapter introduces participants' professional backgrounds to set the scene for interpreting the findings.

4.2. ECCE settings: immediate environments

The two preschools that participated in the study were similar in some ways. Both preschools were located in disadvantaged areas of Dublin, were mostly state funded and had less than one hundred children. In both settings there were a high number of children from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds. However the two preschools differed in other aspects such as the curriculum followed in the setting, group composition in terms of children's cultural backgrounds and physical environment with an emphasis on its culturally relevant aspects. These issues are discussed below in detail in separate sections where description of the preschools is provided.

4.2.1. Preschool A

Preschool A was established several decades ago and has been funded by the government and donor organizations since its opening. Located in the centre of Dublin, the setting has a long history of serving children from a disadvantaged area. Throughout the last decade with the growth of immigrant communities in the area, it has served children from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds. At the time of the fieldwork ninety-six children between the ages of three

to five years were enrolled in the preschool of which approximately one third had an immigrant background and were from Asian, European and African countries. The preschool groups were divided according to the age groups for children between the ages of three to four and four to five. Two practitioners worked in each group: a teacher and an assistant. The school followed the *Aistear* curriculum. Throughout the day children were engaged in various routines, structured and free play activities. The room spaces in each group were divided into several thematic areas: Home corner, art corner, science corner, computer area, library, etc.

Each preschool group had their own room, where most daily activities were carried out. In addition there were common areas that were used by all groups at different times: a central room, dining room, garden and library. The central room had equipment for sports and physical activities and during the day children from each group spent some time there on active games. This space, as well as the garden provided opportunities for children to communicate and play with children from other groups.

The library had a rich collection of children's books. It included a number of books in different native languages of some children in the Preschool A: Polish, Romanian, Chinese, Mongolian, etc. However, books were not in every language that was spoken by the preschoolers' families. A small section of the library included a number of non-fiction books on diversity and difference, including culture. Visual ethnic differences (or 'racial' differences) were frequently present in the images of fiction as well as non-fiction books; however story books with stories developing in different cultures or lifestyles other than western middle-class were quite rare. In each group practitioners were responsible for changing books in their classroom according to the children's interests and themes covered in the curriculum. In addition to the books kept on the shelves in the classroom, at the end of the day each child was given a book to take home for the night and return it the next day. All of the children had their lunch in the large dining room; however snacks were eaten in the group rooms.

Having a substantial history of serving children and families from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds Preschool A had a rich visual representation of children and adults from different cultures. Common areas, except the garden, all featured such representations in abundance including: photos of children in the preschool engaged in various activities, UNICEF posters depicting diverse lifestyles of children from different cultures, and about a dozen baby dolls with visible ethnic differences (skin tone and eye shape). Outside one of the teacher's rooms a TV

screen was attached to the wall and the slideshow with children's pictures of recent activities was continuously played so that parents could see their children's work and play at preschool. In addition there were other items in the common areas that carried cultural meanings. For example, a world map was placed on the hallway wall featuring pinned notes of the translated word 'hello' in various languages of children enrolled in the preschool. However, there were some inaccuracies with at least some translations in the languages the researcher was familiar with. It should be noted that the map was attached at adult level, making it less reachable for children. In the common areas no other items reflected language diversity present in the preschool. In the dining hall a painting was attached to the wall with a note stating the name of the immigrant father who had painted it and the name of his child from the preschool. The second floor hallway leading to the dining hall had a board attached to the wall with some simple Christian prayers and a few symbols and images. No symbols or images from other religions were observed in common areas.

For the study two practitioners (teachers) Catherine and Eimear and their respective groups were selected from Preschool A. On the day of observation none of the activities were explicitly related to culture. None of the routines or activities in either of the two groups included cultural aspects.

Catherine's group consisted of sixteen three to four year old children of which nine were Irish. Four children's families were from Asian countries (Mongolia, China, and Bangladesh), two from African countries (Mauritius and Somalia) and one child's parents were from two European countries (Lithuania/Latvia). Catherine, the teacher, was from England and the assistant, an immigrant from Nigeria, initially introduced herself to the researcher as being 'from Africa and Ireland'. The preschool day for the group started at 9:20 AM and lasted until 13:00 PM. There was an abundance of children's photos engaged in various activities and during the observation day practitioners in the group actively used the camera to capture children's play and work. The pictures were captured for the children's portfolios as well as for display in the room. All of the children in the group were represented individually and in groups in the photos around the room and their art work was also displayed in several corners of the room. The home corner, which had various costumes and props for role play, had one 'white' and one 'black' baby doll and a couple of ethnic dresses from other cultures. The Library corner had about thirty books which included stories about animals, classic fairy tales, and other fiction or non-fiction books featuring

children and adults. As in the preschool library, books on display in the room at the observation time most often had only 'white' characters; there were a few books with one or more characters who had visibly other ethnic background (for example, various skin tones, face features, hair texture, clothes). Such diversity in illustrations or photos was present more in non-fiction books (for example a book named "Hats", where different types and colours of hats were demonstrated by children with different 'racial' backgrounds). There was only one story book where one of the main characters was a non-white child. Based on a careful survey of the books on the shelves in the library corner, none of them seemed to include a story or an episode directly or indirectly touching upon issues of various lifestyles or cultures. There were several handmade books on various themes as well. One such book was dedicated to some UNCRC articles which were written in simple words. One of the phrases from the book said: 'Max, Zahra, Betty, Juan, Suyun, Reza, Paolo, Yoko, Yair, Mohammed, Every one of us shall have a name and a land to call our own.'

Some diversity in visual representations was also present in manipulative materials such as LEGO figures and puzzles. Around the room, there were some labels in different languages, including some of the languages spoken in the families of the children in the group. For example, 'Writing area' and 'Computer area' had these labels also translated in Russian, Urdu, Bengalese, Polish, Lithuanian, Gujarati, French, Spanish, Somali, and Portuguese.

Eimear's group was equally culturally diverse with ten children from Ireland, four from European (Romania, Georgia, Poland), one from African (Somalia) and one from Asian countries (China). Children were between the ages of four and five years. The preschool day started at 9:20 AM and lasted until 13:00 PM for half of the children, while the other half stayed on for another hour. Visual representations of children were quite different from Catherine's group. There were average size photos of each individual child with their name tags at children's level, and in a couple of other places on the wall, but there were no small group or individual photos of children engaged in activities. Like Catherine and her assistant, Eimear and the other practitioner in the room often used cameras to take pictures of children; however they were taken for their individual portfolios rather than for displaying in the room. Some of the children's art work was present on the walls, but not as extensively as in the other room.

There were a few large posters in the room reflecting 'racial' diversity among the images of children doing some routine tasks or following rules with relevant notes under the image (for

example: A photo of a boy with darker skin crossing a road with a note “Look out on the road”). There were some smaller posters illustrating classroom rules reflecting some ‘racial’ diversity.

The library corner in Eimear’s room included a couple of dozen books. Even though the overall pattern of book types was similar to those in Catherine’s room, there were several story books that had children and adults of African heritage as the main characters. One story was located in unidentified African country depicting a local rural lifestyle different in some ways from more typical Irish ones. In addition, the classic story book *The Princess and the Frog* featured illustrations of ‘black’-only characters. There were no books or signs in the room in languages other than English.

The richness of representations of children and families from different cultures in Preschool A, created a strong impression of respect and appreciation for a multicultural community. At the same time, images quite often were representing ‘racial’ diversity, which seemed to silence less ‘visible’ ethnic and cultural backgrounds. For example, in both Catherine’s and Eimear’s rooms there were Muslim children; however during the six hours of observations of resources and the environment no references to Muslim religion or cultural aspects were found; nor was there any visible acknowledgement of religious differences such as posters on the walls. This was especially noteworthy as the practitioners identified these children as following religious rules, such as avoiding eating pork and pork-derived products, wearing a hijab (a headscarf) for some time, etc.

4.2.2. Preschool B

Preschool B was established less than five years ago. It is located in a disadvantaged area outside of central Dublin. Unlike Preschool A it has served a culturally diverse community for only a few years that includes Irish (settler), Irish Travellers and immigrant families from various countries. Out of total of seventy-five children in the setting, almost one third were from cultural minority groups. However, compared to the Preschool A, the setting was ‘racially’ homogenous with almost all children being ‘white’. It should be noted that the principal of the preschool noting that the setting had not yet done much in terms of cultural diversity, expressed a very open attitude towards the study and interest in viewing and considering the findings of the study. She mentioned that more recently addressing gender and family diversity issues had been a priority of the setting due to a variety of family forms and backgrounds of the children in the

preschool. The preschool had several Persona dolls, which had been used a few times to address behavioural issues among the children. According to the principal, their characters had not been yet richly developed and no cultural identities had been explored.

In Preschool B there were morning and afternoon groups for infants (under eighteen months), toddlers (eighteen months to three years) and preschoolers (three and four year olds).

Preschool B followed the High Scope curriculum. Besides the everyday routine activities, children were mostly given several options to choose their work or play activities. In younger groups children were more freely moving among the activities, while in the older groups they were encouraged to stay on with their choice at least for some time, and afterwards were free to engage in other activities. After completing chosen activities, the older children were expected to recall their plans and actual activities. The curriculum centred on developmentally appropriate practice. Practitioners used COR- Child Observations Record as a tool to identify strengths and weaknesses of children to inform planning of the environment and some activities accordingly. Children in each group were divided in three or four small groups of no more than six children in each group. Each group was assigned a key worker, a practitioner who spent more time getting to know individual children better, working with them in small groups and providing guidance throughout their activities.

Each group in Preschool B had their own room where most activities took place. A common kitchen was used in turns to have lunch or dinner and a small garden was usually used by one group at a time. The school had recently attached a world map on the wall in the kitchen at adult level. During the observation a pair of children showed particular interest in it. They asked the principal about the names of various countries on the map. The principal extended this dialogue by encouraging the children to ask the researcher to name her country of origin and show it to them on the map. She also identified Slovakia on the map for one child, whose Slovakian friend had recently moved there.

Similarly to Preschool A, two practitioners, Fiona and Siobhan in Preschool B participated in the study. In the activities or routines no cultural aspects were observed during the observation time, besides the spontaneous episode that arose from children's questions regarding countries on the world map.

Fiona worked with a group of eighteen preschool children, out of which ten were Irish (settled), three from the Traveller community, two from European countries (Poland, Russia), and three from mixed families from Asia and Europe (Germany and Ireland, Turkey and Poland, India and Slovakia). Siobhan's group consisted of seventeen children from eighteen months to three and half years old. Twelve children in the group were Irish (settled), three from the Traveller community, two children had mixed family background (Ireland and Romania) and in one child's case the staff could not recall the country of origin of one of the child's parent.

Unlike some clear differences between the two rooms in Preschool A, in Preschool B the environment in both rooms looked quite similar except the minor age related differences in furniture, materials and toys provided. Both rooms were divided in several areas: block area, home area, book area, art area, toy area. All areas in both rooms had lots of similar toys and various materials, without much representation of cultural variation. Visual as well as textual messages rarely went beyond the representations of 'racial' differences. For example, there were different 'ethnic' baby dolls, posters depicting children of various backgrounds dressed in ethnic clothes, puzzles with pictures of children and their families with various ethnic backgrounds, small figurines of both gender and various ethnicities dressed in professional and ethnic clothes (for example, a 'white' female farmer and an Arab man dressed in a white dress and a head-cover). In the preschoolers' group there were a dozen CDs mostly with Irish songs, children's classic stories, and celebration songs (Christmas, birthday). There were two CDs that represented different music genres from non-English speaking countries: Italian opera arias and Spanish guitar songs. Different 'races' were represented in the images of some books in both rooms, but similarly to Preschool A, cultural diversity of lifestyles or beliefs were not a main or even secondary topic of any of the books that were present in the rooms at the time of the observations. Representations of non-'white' children and adults mostly were included in non-fiction books, leaving only a few story books where the main characters were not 'white'. However, there were several books in the preschoolers' group that explored diversity more directly in terms of children's various abilities and visual appearance (for example, *Elmer*, by David McKee, a story about a different looking, colourfully patched elephant, who is loved by others and celebrated for its difference). In Preschool B there were no books or signs in various native languages of the children. Both rooms had photos of children in the group engaged in

various activities. In addition there was a family wall with photos of children with their families and pets.

The songs, the books, posters and other visual images (except the family wall) were not reflective of the children's backgrounds, including Traveller children that were enrolled in the respective groups.

4.3. Participants' backgrounds

Participants had a variety of work and educational experiences, but all of them shared experience of working in culturally diverse ECCE settings for some time. All participants, with the exception of Catherine were Irish.

The length of experience of working in such settings ranged from eighteen months (Eimear) to approximately twenty years of work (Catherine). Siobhan had experience of working in disadvantaged and culturally diverse communities for six years, while Fiona had worked in similar settings for eight years. Participants also differed in their educational qualifications and the training undertaken on diversity and equality issues.

Catherine

Catherine held a Bachelor's degree in psychology, and a post-graduate certificate and Master's degree in early childhood education. Her work experience in culturally diverse ECCE settings amounted to approximately twenty years, starting from being a teacher in various ECCE settings in inner-city London. She completed various modules on equality and diversity issues throughout her years in formal training programmes.

Eimear

Eimear held a Bachelor of Arts in Philosophy and English and a higher diploma in Primary school teaching. She had spent several years working in a primary school as a teacher in junior infants' class and sixth class. She also had worked with older children (fourteen to seventeen years old) teaching English as a foreign language in France. Preschool A was the first ECCE setting she had worked in. However, other educational institutions she had worked at were also culturally diverse.

Fiona

Fiona had a FETAC level five certificate in Childcare, Montessori and special needs education. She had also done a module on diversity as part of her Montessori training. According to Fiona, the module was more general and did not explore cultural diversity in depth. Throughout her career as an early childhood practitioner, Fiona had worked in three different settings for a total of eight years: a private crèche, community ECCE centre and Preschool B. All settings she had worked in were located in different disadvantaged areas of Dublin and enrolled children from culturally diverse backgrounds.

Siobhan

Siobhan had a Bachelor's degree in early childhood education care and education. She had started working in ECCE settings as part of her practical coursework in various placements: community service, children's hospital and voluntary organization. She had also done High-scope training course during her practice in her final year of studies. After completing her degree programme Siobhan started working in an ECCE centre where she worked for three years until moving to Preschool B three years ago. All her practice placements and work settings were located in different disadvantaged areas of Dublin and all of them served families and children with diverse cultural backgrounds including Travellers and immigrant families. Her Bachelor's programme included a module on equality and diversity.

CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

5.1. Introduction

The following chapter describes the findings and presents them in light of recent research and theoretical debate on cultural diversity in ECCE. It presents key findings organized in themes and discusses patterns common to the participants, while also identifying perspectives that do not fit in those patterns. Along with commonalities and differences between perspectives and experiences, voices of individual practitioners are often singled out to underline the complexity of individual experience and meaning-making. Findings under each theme are also discussed in light of existing research and theoretical literature, while keeping committed to the idea of uniqueness of experiences and perspectives of participants in this small scale study.

5.2. Perspectives on cultural diversity within the early childhood context

5.2.1. The concept of culture

The interviews with the participating practitioners suggest that a wide range of understandings concerning the concept of culture and cultural diversity exists. There were some common meanings participants ascribed to the concept, but there were also clear differences. Most often culture was viewed in the light of minorities and only Catherine extended the concept to difference and diversity in itself, rather than presenting it in relation to majority culture:

For me it's valuing people's uniqueness. Seeing similarities, we all have similarities, but we also have differences and to value those differences, not just acknowledge them but kind of to celebrate them, to draw attention to them.
(Catherine, Preschool A).

Two practitioners' views (Fiona and Eimear) were more specific confining the concept of cultural diversity to specific aspects such as nationality and ethnicity. While reflecting on cultural diversity, Fiona identified Irish Travellers and foreign nationals currently living in Ireland and did not extend the concept further.

In some cases single individuals presented a variety of meanings throughout the interview. For example, Eimear initially emphasized linguistic and communication aspects when referring to

the concept of cultural diversity. Her educational background and work experience in teaching English as a second language could have contributed to the strong belief in the primal place of language in defining the culturally diverse ECCE community:

...People who are coming in with maybe zero English or English as a second language. So I think the first thing that presents itself to me is that the child is understanding what's going on. (Eimear, Preschool A).

When prompted to share her ideas about other aspects of cultural diversity that could be relevant in ECCE setting she again emphasized language related aspects, but later in the interview mentioned celebrating festivals from various cultures and taking into consideration issues that might be sensitive to some cultural or religious groups.

Unlike Fiona's and Eimear's understandings of cultural diversity, Siobhan and Catherine ascribed wider and more inclusive meanings to the concept. Siobhan identified other facets of diversity as contributing to cultural diversity:

(Cultural diversity is)...things like gender, and minority groups, race, and social class. And because it is a community setting we have children from all different minority groups like gender, race, children from different backgrounds and then I'd have one parent who would be from a different country, or both parents, the whole family. (Siobhan, Preschool B).

Catherine's approach towards culture as a complex concept was suggested from her question to the researcher after hearing the topic of the study. She inquired, what the researcher meant under the concept of 'culture', explaining that some confine culture to 'racial' diversity, while for her cultural differences could be even identified among Irish children and families depending on their residential location:

There are two children who are not inner-city, they live in a more affluent, privileged area. And you can see that they have different, all sorts of experience and a different vocabulary and different outlook on life maybe. (Catherine, Preschool A).

These findings suggest that practitioners may hold a wide variety of views on what represents cultural diversity in early childhood. Even within such a small sample clearly distinct perspectives were shared by the practitioners, even within the preschools. Interestingly, a recent in depth study of two preschools practices and practitioners' perspectives on cultural diversity suggests the opposite (Loveridge et al., 2012). Loveridge et al. (2012) found that beliefs and

practices differed between the preschools but were quite similar within the preschools among the co-workers. In contrast to this, findings of the current study suggest that practitioners' perspectives could be more related to professional characteristics (such as education and length of experience working in multicultural ECCE settings) rather than the preschool policies or practice. Robinson and Jones Diaz (2006) argue that early childhood practitioners' beliefs and practices are shaped by multiple discourses that are available to them within preschool, in the professional field or in general in society. Preschool policy or curriculum seemed to be less important for practitioners in this small sample in forming their perspectives regarding cultural diversity and the relevance of addressing related issues with young children.

Findings suggest that practitioners were more prone to define culture and cultural diversity in relation to minority groups. Cannella and Viruru (2004) provide post-colonialist critique of early childhood and multicultural education, which for a long time had viewed diversity as a minority issue and had sought reasons of inequalities within minority cultures rather than majority cultures, which could be the perpetrators of inequality on a structural and discursive level. In addition minority cultures have been viewed as *exquisite*, *exotic* and different from the *norm* of majority culture (ibid.). Viewing majority culture as the norm and minority culture as the *other* seemed to be a common belief among the practitioners. This is an interesting finding, as the guiding documents in early childhood education in Ireland emphasize the importance of practitioners' awareness of their own culture and potential biases (Office of the Minister for Children, 2006; CECDE & Department of Education and Skills, 2006). The proponents of the anti-bias approach have argued that awareness and reflections over one's own culture are a basis for carrying out culturally meaningful practices (Chen, Nimmo & Fraser, 2009, Derman Sparks and the ABC Task Force, 1989, Murray & Urban, 2012). Without such awareness practitioners' may be less capable of having an open dialogue on equal grounds with families from different cultures (Gramelt, 2013; Chen, Nimmo & Fraser, 2009).

5.2.2. Practitioners locating themselves in culturally diverse ECCE community

When asked to reflect on their experiences of cultural diversity in the ECCE context, in most instances practitioners did not seem to acknowledge their own culture and its potential for bias against different cultures. As discussed above, cultural diversity was mostly viewed in relation to minority cultures. However Catherine's perspective was more inclusive and she viewed majority

culture as just another set of ways of doing things. This could be partly related to her own identity as a foreigner working in Ireland, her training and many years of work experience in culturally diverse environments.

All of the practitioners were open to further training on issues related to cultural diversity; however some underlined the need to advance their competence in this regard and emphasized the critical importance of training and external support for practitioners to meet the needs of children with different cultural backgrounds:

I think when workshops come up, I think it's good to keep on top of things, if there are any changes or... People have suggestions...I like people coming into the room, because I think, you know, same adults are working in the room for a year, and you can kind of get used to while you try to replace things...but I think if someone comes in with a fresh eye and goes 'You could really do this here'.(Siobhan, Preschool B).

Practitioners had a variety of views about their own roles as members of culturally diverse ECCE communities. It varied from being a practitioner, who is sensitive to the needs of individual children instead of singling out their needs as members belonging to particular cultural group, to being the practitioner who takes the responsibility to confront prejudice among children and parents. For example, Fiona emphasized her role to support and treat every child equally despite their belonging to any specific cultural group:

I'm supporting them that way all the time, there's no reason to pin point those children, whereas I think it's better to just let them be children. They are children among children at the end of the day and they are all the same. Doesn't matter about their culture or their background. (Fiona, Preschool B).

In contrast to this role, Catherine brought up some examples from her practice, where she actively engaged to challenge biased or even racist views of some parents or children:

Many times, particularly with racist comments... either by children about other children or by parents... or you know that 'they smell', there are various things that they might say, and you would have to challenge them. (Catherine, Preschool A).

Similar cases were recalled by Eimear, where she had to challenge children's racist comments. In addition, she also emphasized her crucial role to teach children English as a second language. According to Eimear in order to facilitate this process in one case she decided to learn Chinese words from a child's parent:

I did sit down with her mother and I asked her to teach me the Chinese words for toilet and different things that I needed to make these allowances. (Eimear, Preschool A).

Along with her active engagement regarding race or language related incidents, Eimear also brought up some cases, where children had shown interest in cultural differences but she confined herself to only immediate short responses, without further engagement with the topic:

For one portion of the year she (referring to a Muslim girl) wore like a little girl's headscarf. And that was just, somebody once just said, 'what's that for?' But it was equally fashionable. Then, she wasn't even speaking, I just wanted her to, would she say anything. And I think nothing arose of that really. (Eimear, Preschool A).

These findings suggest that practitioners' assumed various roles for themselves as members of culturally diverse ECCE community. These roles may be viewed on a continuum, having belief in equal treatment of all children, who "are all the same" on one end, and belief in challenging prejudice by respecting, acknowledging and celebrating diversity on the other end. Even though most practitioners rarely incorporated culture related themes as part of regular planning or activities, all who could recall cases of prejudice or bias among children or parents had addressed the issue when the incidents had occurred. However, according to the findings, in some cases when children showed interest in cultural differences they had observed, practitioners had limited themselves to short responses without providing further opportunities for discussion and exploration of the topics (further details on these findings are discussed below in section 5.3.2). Fennimore (2007) argues that there might be various issues that may contribute to practitioners' reluctance to address diversity in ECCE, including lack of awareness of their own biases and/or biases perpetuated by popular discourses, lack of institutional support and proper collaboration with other practitioners, fear of taking risks on issues that are sensitive, etc. The limited scope of this study does not allow for any assumptions regarding issues that may have contributed to the acquisition of relatively passive roles of practitioners. Nevertheless, examples shared by some practitioners suggest that on occasions where they had witnessed insensitive attitudes towards difference, they felt obliged to intervene and challenge them. Even though it was more related to 'race' and racism, and other cultural characteristics were left invisible, these instances suggest practitioners' acknowledgement of their role as contributors to equality and social justice. Increasingly early childhood educators are envisioned to approach diversity in ECCE from a critical pedagogical and social justice perspective (Schoorman, 2011; Cannella, 1997; Robinson

and Jones Diaz, 2006). In addition, findings suggest that practitioners' are open to further training and receiving support on cultural diversity issues. This is significant as the research evidence from preschools in Ireland suggests that practitioners who had undergone trainings on diversity and equality issues had become more sensitive to the needs and interests of minority children and more skilled to address those needs (Duffy & Gibbs, 2014).

5.2.3. Individualism and cultural identities

Findings suggest that practitioners believe cultural diversity should be addressed according to the individual children's needs. All practitioners emphasized an individual child as an important starting point for planning and providing meaningful ECCE. However they differed considerably in how strongly group cultural identities should be emphasized and supported within ECCE contexts. Practitioners' beliefs could be placed on a continuum from a view where a child is presented decontextualized from the cultural group it belongs to, to a view which emphasizes and approves supporting, even celebration of various cultural differences among groups. The following two quotes illustrate these views:

I think that most people in here just treat the children equal. It doesn't matter about their background at all. (Fiona, Preschool B).

I don't believe in kind of, this sort of blanket ignoring, 'everybody's the same, we treat everybody equally' and we're culturally blind when ignoring it. I do believe in bringing it up if a child mentions something about for example, different skin tone, yeah, we talk about it and we bring it up and, you know, we can paint it, sing about it, draw it. (Catherine, Preschool A).

Siobhan's and Eimear's beliefs could be placed somewhere in between these ends of the continuum. Siobhan emphasized the importance of getting familiar with the individual child and their family to provide for meaningful experiences and environment for each child. At the same time she cautioned against emphasizing cultural differences among children and identified the risk of possible negative effects by 'singling them out':

So we'll take the key worker who'll get to know the child and family. But I do think that sometimes just because a child is from the Traveller community, you know, not to go over, kind of to single them out. So I think a lot of it is based on the child's interests and that goes for any child. (Siobhan, Preschool B).

Along with this cautionary stance, Siobhan acknowledged several times that the *Siolta* accreditation process had revealed the need for improvement to address cultural diversity in Preschool B. Siobhan showed her openness to critically view her current beliefs.

Even though Eimear gave some examples of incorporating various cultural events in the curriculum, she also firmly believed in the primacy of responding to children's individual linguistic needs in cases they belonged to a different nationality:

When I see a child coming in, while I know they might be from another country, I first and foremost just see them as an individual. I don't really see them as Ali from Turkey. I just see him as a boy who presents himself in front of me and he has his language difficulties there and that's what I'm working on. (Eimear, Preschool A).

Overall, practitioners in this study were more inclined to prioritize responsiveness towards individual children according to their individual needs, rather than considering in advance the cultural group the child belongs to. Comparative studies in various cultures and critical theories in childhood education have challenged the dominant assumption in western ECCE discourse that developmentally appropriate best practice should be centred on an individual child, decontextualized from the groups and locales s/he belongs to (Brooker, 2005; Vandebroek, 2007, Adair & Tobin, 2008). On the other hand, with increasing diversity in ECCE settings, emerging discourses on multiculturalism have led to *culturally responsive practices* that prioritize the needs of children as member of cultural groups. Hyun (2007) argues that in practice this has often been reduced to cultural stereotyping which has been barely responsive to children's and their families' needs. According to Hyun (2007) children in increasingly diverse communities have multiple identities and belongings and ECCE practitioners need to go beyond the 'ethnically singular multiculturalisms' which are not relevant in responding to their complex needs (Hyun, 2007, p. 265). Some practitioners' simultaneous openness towards involving culturally rich materials and activities in preschool and fears not to make stereotypical assumptions about cultural groups are in line with Hyun's vision of culturally responsive teachers. However, other perspectives were also shared by practitioners, where they thought that addressing group identity needs were completely irrelevant to children's lives at this young age. Various studies provide similar evidence, that varying approaches, individual or group oriented may be coexisting among practitioners in similar multicultural settings (Stier et al., 2012; Loveridge et al, 2012).

5.2.4. Relevance of cultural diversity for young children

Emphasis on children's individual characteristics and needs as opposed to their cultural identity (identities) seemed to be closely related to the practitioners' beliefs in the irrelevance of addressing issues of culture with young children. All practitioners, with the exception of Catherine, at some point shared the opinion that addressing matters pertaining to cultural diversity would be irrelevant either because children at preschool age are cognitively immature to grasp these issues, or that such issues might artificially 'other' the children from the minority groups.

I would do clothes, but I wouldn't do clothes for another country. Not with this age group...Yeah, I feel like they don't have the foundation for you to even build on it yet. I would have done this with an older age group for sure. (Eimear, Preschool A).

However, these perspectives were not necessarily fixed; throughout the interviews practitioners' reflecting on examples from their experience negotiated these ideas. For example, the quote above demonstrates Eimear's belief that presenting culturally diverse materials would be beyond children's cognitive grasp at the age of three or four years, when children were still struggling to understand concepts in general. However, within the time of the interview she also brought up several instances of children referring to the 'race' of another child, questioning a religious attribute worn by a child or inquiring about another child's religious dietary restrictions.

It should also be noted that while being more cautious about the relevance of cultural diversity in the ECCE context, exploring other group identities, for example in terms of gender and special needs, were often mentioned by practitioners as more relevant to the age group. Interestingly, these beliefs were shared almost concurrently with examples of incidences where cultural or ethnic identities were portrayed as central to children's lives as well. For example, even though Eimear gave several examples of children's curiosity about cultural differences, she still thought that children were more aware of disabilities than cultural differences. This is an important finding that suggests that despite vivid examples of children's awareness of culture, practitioners might be prone to believe addressing cultural diversity has little relevance for children at this young age. This finding may be interpreted within the framework suggested by Robinson and Jones Diaz (2006), who argue that practitioners' perspectives are constructed within various discourses available to them. Findings suggest that practitioners' might not feel comfortable to

question these discourses, despite numerous counter-examples from their own experience (Grieshaber and Cannella, 2001).

Post-structuralist critics have argued that developmental psychology and developmentally appropriate practice have dominated the field of early childhood education, basing their assumptions on studies carried out mostly in English speaking countries with middle class children and families (Cannella, 1997; Bloch, 2000). These discourses have created a certain image of a universal child that has governed the field of early childhood education (Cannella, 1997; MacNaughton, 2005). In addition, western constructions of childhood as the period of immaturity and innocence have contributed to the dominant idea that young children are unable to hold prejudices against individuals or groups that differ from them (Grieshaber & Cannella, 2001). However, research in this area, provides evidence that children appropriate adult messages and power relationships that may exist between various social and cultural groups (Aboud, 2003; Patterson & Bigler, 2006; Derman Sparks & The ABC Task Force, 1989). Indeed, almost all practitioners in this study have shared examples from their experience that coincide with this research evidence, however their general beliefs were still confined to view children as insufficiently mature to grasp cultural differences.

5.3. Experiencing culture in the early childhood context

5.3.1. Language as a central focus

Findings suggest that practitioners emphasised language as a critical aspect of cultural diversity in ECCE. Even though perspectives related to language differed among the practitioners, its centrality in relation to cultural diversity emerged with all practitioners. Fiona, who considered other cultural themes to be completely irrelevant to the ECCE context, also referred to various issues related to language: ‘When they (*parents*) bring the children in, they’d like the children to learn English, so they are very happy how things are going.’ (Fiona, Preschool B).

Perspectives related to language, seemed to be more consistent within preschools. These perspectives seemed to be closely related to the preschool policies. For example, in Preschool A practitioners’ beliefs in the importance of supporting English language acquisition coexisted alongside the policy of giving a different story book at the end of each day. In Preschool B Irish

sign language *Lámh* was often used with children, which according to both practitioners, benefited all children in the preschool, both children with or without language difficulties.

All practitioners emphasized the critical importance for children to learn both English as a second language and their native language. In preschool B both practitioners drew similar examples from their experience. To support learning native language by children, practitioners encouraged parents to use their native language in families:

Yeah, like with the language, sometimes they (parents) say, 'Oh, I want them to learn English, so I'm trying to speak to them in English at home'. And we're trying to encourage speaking their own language because they are going to be getting English language in here and obviously through school if they are going to go to the local school. Because we would have a couple of children whose grandparents would have come home maybe three times a year and we were trying to explain that it's very important to use the home language because obviously you'll have family coming home that will want your child to be able to understand and communicate with them. (Siobhan, Preschool B).

On the other hand, Eimear in Preschool A mentioned her experience of advising an immigrant parent to use some basic English at home as the child would not speak any English in the preschool. At the same time Eimear as well as Catherine discussed their commitment to value and respect the native languages of children by making them visible and audible within the ECCE setting. Unlike in Preschool B where English and child's native languages were assigned separate spaces (preschool space and family space, respectively), in Preschool A, occasionally special activities were planned where some languages were represented. Examples of such activities include inviting parents to read familiar stories to children in various native languages represented in the group. Other examples of audio-visual 'presence' of language could be found in the books in various languages, music and song CDs and sign posts in different languages in common areas as well as Catherine's room. The absence of such 'imagery' in Eimear's room could be related to her short experience of working with young non-English speaking children as well as her background in teaching English as a second language. During the interview she shared her fears of failing her responsibility to equip children with English language skills necessary for school readiness. Meanwhile, she explained that in her second year of work at the culturally diverse ECCE setting, she had already developed confidence in this regard, as she believed her commitment and hard work had eventually brought anticipated results. Practitioners' perception of the centrality of language can be illustrated by Catherine's response

to the researcher's question about the general needs to address matters related to cultural diversity:

Well the aspirational things like, we could do with the language support teaching, you know in terms of somebody who is... I mean I've done a lot of it myself but somebody additional who has experience with teaching children English as an additional language. (Catherine, Preschool A).

This statement is especially important as among the participants of the study Catherine had the widest and most inclusive understanding of culture and emphasized the importance and relevance of exploring various cultural themes in ECCE context.

Interestingly, language was also referred to in the context of children's understanding of difference and the issue of pre-prejudices. Examples given by Siobhan described her experiences on multiple occasions where children had referred to Traveller or immigrant child's accent or knowledge of language in a negative way:

...Because they are noticing that the Travellers have a different accent and obviously, it's, I would find the children from the Traveller community a little bit hard to understand sometimes, they might have a stronger accent. (Siobhan, Preschool B).

The findings of the study suggest that among the various issues related to culture, language was most often referred to as an important aspect that had to be addressed in the ECCE context. Language was also identified as the single major challenge to communication with families. This finding is consistent with research evidence from other countries (Murray, 2012; Stier et al. 2012). For example practitioners in South African preschools also identified language as critical challenge in communication with families belonging to different cultural groups (Murray, 2012).

There were a few examples in Preschool A, where practitioners had incorporated children's native languages in planned activities and environment. The UNESCO analytical review document *Enhancing of Children from Diverse Language Backgrounds* (2011) emphasizes the importance of providing children with opportunities for education in their mother tongue and helping them become proficient in it before using a second language in academic work. Practitioners' beliefs about the importance of children learning their native languages is in line with this argument, however the two preschools were not multilingual and practitioners usually supported this by encouraging parents to speak their mother tongue in the family, or (in the case of Preschool A) provide a few opportunities to hear their native language in preschool through

activities like reading and music. However, it should be noted that these opportunities did not provide children to actively use their native language within the preschool setting. For example, Stier et al. (2012) provide examples of how children's identities and positive self-esteem were supported by encouraging children to teach some words in their native language to other children.

5.3.2. Possibilities for cultural diversity education

All practitioners had given a few examples where themes related to cultural diversity other than language had been addressed either as a planned activity or in response to a specific situation. Planned activities were only present in Preschool A and they were related to the celebration of majority and minority religious or other festivals and traditions (Easter, Christmas, Chinese New Year, Romanian celebration of St. Nicholas day, etc.). According to Eimear, the preschool had a Catholic ethos in general, but Catholic traditions were not overemphasized and all families and children were welcome to participate in celebrating various traditions or festivals. As an example she described an event called the New Life Ceremony, which was essentially an Easter related tradition at Preschool A where non-Catholic families had participated as well.

Although the school is under the Catholic ethos, we are not really asked to hugely promote that aspect over the curriculum. Because it's not the first priority. And next week at the New Life Ceremony, it's about really like, things being born and planting things, so we don't really mention that much the story of Easter and Jesus and all that. But, because the principal will also present usually a bunch of flowers to the mother who most recently had a baby. And that would have been a non-Catholic family last year I remember. (Eimear, Preschool A).

Another example of a planned activity was also recalled by Eimear, where a story was read about a girl living in an African country and afterwards, relating to the story theme further activities were planned, such as playing African drum beats.

In Preschool B the absence of any kind of planned activities related to culture could be partly due to the high-scope curriculum, where children's choice of activity was prioritized and planned activities were mostly limited to addressing strengths and weaknesses of children connected to their developmental outcomes.

Spontaneous situations where practitioners had seen the need to respond were more often recalled during the interviews. The use of such moments as opposed to planned activities was

also emphasized as a relevant context for bringing cultural diversity issues to the attention of children. For example, based on her experience, Siobhan argued that if these themes were addressed in response to individual children's expressed interests there would be less risk for children from minority cultural groups to feel differentiated from others: 'But just be careful, because you have a child from a minority group, not to plan and single them out.' (Siobhan, Preschool B).

Practitioners gave various examples of referring to culture in conversations with children. These examples mostly referred to children's questions or comments on dietary restrictions (for example not eating pork or meat), children's clothes (for example, a Muslim girl wearing a hijab), 'race' (for example, identifying 'racial' resemblance of cartoon characters: 'He looks like Xin!', or making racist comments: 'I don't want to play with the black doll, I hate it!', 'They smell'), language (for example, referring to accent or knowledge of language: 'She can't talk' or 'He talks funny'), music (for example, becoming interested in a foreign song).

Practitioners' strategies to address cultural themes in such situations differed depending on the occasion. Where prejudicial statements were implied, all practitioners (except Fiona, who could not draw such examples from her experience) thought it was important to address the issue right away by assisting the child to reflect on their words or behaviour and providing advice for alternative behaviour. In most cases the response to such incidences did not go beyond this. Catherine was the only practitioner who referred to the importance of raising issues again while children were participating in activities that they enjoyed. Children's questions or comments that acknowledged cultural or ethnic difference in a positive or neutral way were not usually followed up by the practitioners beyond affirming comments. Stier et al. (2012) suggest that the teachers, who most successfully manage practice in culturally diverse ECCE groups, are the ones who are able to use spontaneous occasions skilfully to address children's culture in positive and supportive ways, enhance their identities and sense of belonging. In this study, practitioners in Preschool A and Preschool B were open to address cultural diversity in spontaneous situations, rather than planned activities, which can be a significant basis for localized and culture sensitive practice (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999; Stier et al., 2012). However, practitioners' lack of prolonged engagement with emerged issues might be indicative of the lack of awareness of possibilities that such situations offer or lack of skills to positively engage children in cultural activities.

Overall, practitioners in this sample did not share many examples of incorporating culture related topics in curriculum and planned activities. Moreover, one case recalled by a practitioner in Preschool A could have raised concerns about celebrating majority culture at the expense of silencing minority cultures. The case involved prolonged celebration of Christmas without taking into account sensitivities of some families affiliated with different religion. This is notable, as the case was recalled by a practitioner who had shared strong beliefs and commitments to respect various cultures and ways of living.

Moss (2007) argues that ECCE institutions need to be viewed as sites for democratic practice, where diverse voices are heard and embedded into practice. According to him, democratic principles will allow the ‘possibility for diversity to flourish’ which creates opportunities for new approaches to emerge (Moss, 2007, p. 7). In the incident described above, where a Muslim family absented themselves from preschool before Christmas week, the practitioner had chosen a passive stance and preferred not to engage in dialogue to discuss the issue with the family. Nevertheless, the practitioner explained her silence from an ethical standpoint, in order to avoid uneasiness for family by referring to their absence and differing religious beliefs.

Findings suggest that, some resources that could be used for bringing up topics related to different cultures were not used to these ends. For example, Persona Dolls are recognized to be an effective tool for developing children’s reflection skills, empathy and critical thinking towards prejudice (Brown, 2008; Murray & Urban, 2012). Even though they were available in one of the preschools, they were only used for the purposes of behaviour management.

The environmental cues in the preschools as well as the practitioner’s stated beliefs suggest that there was a general awareness of the importance of providing culturally sensitive practice for all children. However findings from observation and interview data suggest that the issues related to culture were not often explored or even referenced in everyday practice. These findings are consistent with other studies, which suggest that practitioners adhering to general beliefs in the importance of addressing cultural diversity in ECCE, might lack the knowledge and/or skills to implement it in practice (Stier et al., 2012; Berthelsen & Karuppiyah, 2011).

5.3.3. Perspectives on environment and materials

Practitioners had some common perspectives on the existing environment and materials relevant to cultural diversity. In both preschools practitioners expressed a desire to have more resources reflective of various cultures several times. Practitioners in preschool A were more optimistic about the already existing resources in the preschool and about possibilities for getting new ones that they desired. In Preschool B practitioners mentioned that as part of the *Síolta* accreditation process they had received a recommendation suggesting enrichment of culturally reflective materials.

Practitioners named various resources or toys that would enrich the cultural representations in their classrooms such as kitchen utensils and goods (toys or real) that were used in different cultures and books from different countries. Along with the dependence on funding to acquire additional resources, practitioners also acknowledged the importance of their own initiative and commitment to acquire such materials by motivating parents and other practitioners to contribute to the preschool:

Always asking the girls or family members to collect stuff for us so, you know, if they are on holidays... or some things, some things like different musical instruments, interesting things like that, dress up. (Siobhan, Preschool B).

The importance of the practitioner's initiative in providing a linguistically rich environment was also emphasized, however in some cases the emphasis was on helping English language acquisition, while in other cases on representing various languages.

Practitioners' perspectives on available culture-related resources indicate important findings. Findings suggest that practitioners often critically engage with purchased items, such as various posters, dolls or books that might not be relevant to their preschool. Even though often these images were still present in the rooms, the practitioners cautioned that instead of representing richness of cultures they might be actually purporting stereotypes. In both preschools practitioners mentioned that many multicultural resources were developed in the USA and sometimes were irrelevant to the Irish context. A concern was also shared in preschool B, that resources acquired from the USA as part of the high scope programme were often outdated. This is a significant finding, as it suggests some practitioners' willingness to critically engage with and challenge readily available multicultural resources. Culturally sensitive reflective practice

implies practitioner's reflexivity towards one's actions as well as environment where practice is carried out (Murray and Urban, 2012). The findings from the study suggest that practitioners were being reflective and critical towards the environment, however often did not feel empowered to change it.

Using photos of the children in the preschool was argued to be a better way to meaningfully represent the cultural diversity present within the preschools. Children's photos were frequently taken by all practitioners, but their role in contributing to representation of cultural diversity in the room was not equally acknowledged by all practitioners. In some cases photos were viewed more as a way to communicate with parents, while some practitioners additionally approached them as a possibility to authentically represent the children and their backgrounds:

I believe very much in using children's own photographs. So we use them a lot. Because it's based upon them rather than having multicultural books or puzzles or posters and all these things. I actually think it's better to reflect them rather than having things from the outside. (Catherine, Preschool A).

Siobhan also extended this idea to other materials, basing her argument on her experience. She believed that adjusting the environment according to the child's interests was a focal point for creating meaningful experiences. She illustrated her statement by her experience. Instead of providing culturally varying resources in advance, Siobhan had observed and listened to a Traveller child showing interest in his play regarding Traveller nomadic lifestyle and caravans. Based on this observation, Siobhan decided to enrich the toy area with materials to support the Traveller child's identity and sense of belonging in his play:

We had a little boy and he built the blocks and he was pretending that it was a cart, so we came in and got pieces like wool and tied it around the block so, he had, do you know, to pull the horse and cart. So it's kind of, sometimes it's a little bit more spontaneous. (Siobhan, Preschool B).

The findings from the observation and interview data in two preschools suggest that both settings were aware of the need to incorporate representations of various cultures in the preschool environment. The evidence of such efforts was clear from the abundance of numerous posters, photos, toys, puzzles, music CDs and books representing different ethnicities. The research literature emphasizes the importance of the environment and resources that reflect children's backgrounds (Woodhead & Brooker, 2008). Availability of such resources can nurture and support children's identity and their sense of belonging (ibid.). For example, Patterson &

Bigler's (2006) experimental study of 87 children between the ages of three to five years provides evidence that children easily pick up environmental messages and accordingly develop biases and stereotypes about their own or other groups.

Even though there was an abundance of representations of various cultures, the findings from the two preschools suggest that they were mostly confined to representations of 'racial' diversity. Resources were more reflective of diverse appearances, but rarely reflected actual lifestyles, events or any culture related issues. Resources available in Preschool B provide a good example for this finding. The rooms in Preschool B had relatively rich representations of children and adults with African and Asian backgrounds, without much reference to cultural differences. Surprisingly these groups had almost no representations of the Traveller community despite several Traveller children attending the centre. Johnson (2005) provides extensive criticism of multicultural images and early childhood resources available in ECCE settings in the United States. According to his arguments, these resources are widely available and highly valued in ECCE for *high quality* and culture sensitive practice; however, they often do not reflect the actual cultures of various groups. Johnson (2005) argues that multicultural resources are often decontextualized and construct 'normalized' versions of cultural diversity, which stand far from the realities of different cultural communities. Johnson's argument may be applied to the findings in this study. Even though the preschools were aware and had put effort into creating a culturally representative environment, most representations were decontextualized: they were rather simplistic, mostly emphasizing differences of appearance among various cultural groups and often did not reflect the backgrounds of the preschool children. Vandebroek's (2007) critique of anti-bias approach in European ECCE is based on a similar argument. He argues that in the USA where the anti-bias approach originated, there might be closer links between visual differences and cultural differences, while in the European context cultural differences often do not necessarily imply visual differences (ibid.). In this context, finding that suggests practitioners' critical engagement with multicultural resources gains special significance. The critical awareness may be a significant potential on the way to empowering practitioners to change their environment and equip them with necessary skills.

5.3.4. Families in the lives of preschools

Practitioners viewed communication between preschools and families as central to preschool life. They all shared some ideas related to the importance of valuing family cultures. Various examples drawn from their experiences provide the rich spectrum of communication patterns with different families. Some examples of communication were brought up, where preschool was assumed to be the ‘expert’ and provided advice to parents on behaviour management, supporting language development, etc.

When we have a behaviour problem, their (parents’) English may be broken English, we can explain and we show them, we have rules on the wall for conflict resolution. It’s a step by step programme, we use with the children here. We’d give them a copy and they can work with child at home and we work with the child here. (Fiona, Preschool B).

Other examples emphasized the importance of understanding family culture and making an effort to provide for some similar experiences within preschool to support children’s identity and sense of belonging.

All practitioners emphasized the importance of sharing information about children with their parents and identified language issues as an obstacle in the case of some immigrant families. Practitioners identified language rather than any other cultural aspect as an issue that could be a reason for miscommunication or misunderstanding. Practitioners referred to some immigrant parents’ uneasiness towards communicating with practitioners because of their relatively poor English language skills. They mentioned different strategies that they used to facilitate communication: sending home visual representations (for example, images of appropriate swimming equipment to be worn to swimming pool), using visual images and symbols in the room to inform parent about children’s work and development, or drawing on the assistance of others in the preschool who might know the native language of the parent. The latter is well demonstrated by Eimear’s experience, when she asked a Polish student doing her college practice at Preschool A to do translation during a meeting with a Polish parent. According to Eimear, this was an empowering experience for the parent:

It broke down barriers where before, I think, sometimes the parent is smiling at me and saying ‘yes’ when I haven’t even asked the question that looks for yes or no answer. And it just broke down barriers and I was really able to connect with the mother more and discuss the child’s progress more. Because otherwise I think

that sometimes their own confidence makes them kind of want to run away from you. (Eimear, Preschool A).

In general practitioners believed that the possibility to talk and discuss issues with parents would lead to resolving any misunderstandings. As an example, Siobhan brought up an incident when a Traveller family treated a child's skin condition with home remedies and for a period of several days, the child was not supposed to wash himself. Practitioners initially for a couple days allowed the child to be in the preschool, but had to ask the parent to keep the child at home until the end of treatment due to the hygienic rules in the setting. According to Siobhan, the parent received the request positively and had agreed to keep the child at home. Practitioners recalled no other instances of an issue or misunderstanding between families and the practitioners on the basis of culture, lifestyle or beliefs. However, there was an example of families disengaging themselves from preschool activities due to different religious beliefs. Catherine discussed occasions, when Muslim families did not bring children to the preschool during a week before the Christmas holidays as most activities in preschool were centred on Christmas. The practitioner did not consider the need to address the issue with parents:

Here we sometimes find that Muslim families absent themselves from school for two or three days before the Christmas holidays. Cause they just rather not, their child be completely immersed in the whole kind of Christmas thing. So that's why I wouldn't make a judgement about that and say 'You know, that's such a shame, that your child is missing because...' (Catherine, Preschool A).

Other than in the cases where language was an issue, practitioners did not differentiate among the patterns of communication and engagement of parents from different cultural backgrounds. Parents' initiative and involvement in preschool life was viewed as an individual, personal characteristic to be respected and responded to in the ways families would appreciate:

I don't like to generalize really. I think I try and treat families on the kind of individual basis...There might be parents who are quite needy and who would like to spend quite a bit of time chatting in which case you do kind of have to devote the time to giving them a bit of sympathy or opportunity to have a chat. (Catherine, Preschool A).

Fiona's experiences diverged from others as she could not name a single occasion, where a family's cultural background arose as an issue in communication with families. She could only recall positive experience of collaboration on various issues (child's behaviour management, advising on using native language at home, etc.).

In summary, the findings practitioners held variety of communicative patterns, including those, where practitioners were seen as advisors to parents on various child development and education issues, and where practitioners had come up with creative strategies to involve parents and keep them informed (for example, reading sessions in native language, providing images to deliver messages to parents, or using translator in communication process, etc.). However, these events took place on rare occasions and usually communication with families was limited to drop-off and pick-up time. Research literature suggests how various strategies of working with parents can promote positive communication and facilitate cultural understandings. For example, based on the results of a qualitative study, Linn & Bates (2010) suggest that strategies like home-visiting supports better communication between preschools and families, increases practitioners' awareness and sensitivity to cultural differences and helps practitioners to better plan activities and modify environments in response to children's and families' needs.

The major guiding documents for ECCE in Ireland emphasize the importance of collaboration with families for ensuring high quality and meaningful education for children (CECDE & Department of Education and Skills, 2009; NCCA, 2007; Office of the Minister for Children, 2006). The Diversity and Equality Guidelines for Childcare Providers (Office of the Minister for Children, 2006) prioritizes partnerships with families and provides some general guidelines for establishing positive and responsive relationships. The importance of collaboration between families and ECCE settings for ensuring continuity has been emphasized in research literature (Linn & Bates, 2010; De Gioia, 2013; Brooker, 2005; Adair & Tobin, 2008). De Gioia's (2013) study of communication patterns between families and preschools in six different ECCE settings in Australia provides evidence that if the expectations and attitudes are not shared and discussed between teachers and parents, misunderstandings may persist without teachers even being aware of them. De Gioia concludes by emphasizing the importance of dialogue and negotiation between the various groups.

Ethnographic research evidence suggests that child oriented and developmentally appropriate practices, embraced by many ECCE settings and practitioners in western countries, may run a risk of neglecting important beliefs of various cultural groups on education and care (Brooker, 2005). Discontinuity of expectations and approaches between family and preschool may lead to children's reduced participation in the *developmentally appropriate* activities and consequently labelling child as lagging behind in terms of various skills and competences (Brooker, 2005).

Adair and Tobin's (2008) comparative study of practitioners' and immigrant parents' perspectives in five different countries (England, France, Germany, Italy and the USA) provides evidence that parents are often conflicted with mixed feelings about their children's assimilation in the local culture on one hand and retaining their home culture, on the other. Adair and Tobin (2008) argue that practitioners have ethical obligation to hold a dialogue with parents even when no solutions may be readily available to them. Practitioners in Preschool A and B had widely acknowledged the importance of sensitivity to family cultures; however experiences they shared did not extend to a shared dialogue between themselves and families. In these examples practitioners either avoided discussing sensitive issues with the families, or limited themselves to sharing own perspectives or preschool procedures for handling issues. These findings have implications for policy and practice as it may be assumed that practitioners, despite their openness towards families with culturally diverse backgrounds, may lack skills or confidence to address sensitive issues related cultural diversity.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

6.1. Conclusion

The research was carried out in two preschools in Dublin with the aim to study practitioners' perspectives and experiences of cultural diversity in ECCE settings. Study of practitioners' perspectives was identified as critical to understanding practical challenges and needs that practitioners may be facing at their work. Phenomenology was applied as a research methodology to study practitioners' perspectives in depth.

The research project was conceptualized within postcolonial and poststructural theoretical framework. Firstly, it emphasized the importance of practitioners' perspectives to be heard, as their voices have been often silenced in educational research (Adair & Tobin, 2008). Secondly, approaches to cultural diversity in ECCE were conceptualized from social justice perspective, which embraces diversity and calls for critical engagement towards dominant cultures and discourses (Cannella, 1997; Clarke and Drudy, 2006).

The study found that practitioners in general held open and positive perspectives about cultural diversity in ECCE; however their experiences were indicative of the lack of confidence, skills and knowledge to proactively address issues related cultural diversity issues in ECCE context. Importantly, findings suggest that all practitioners in this sample were open to further trainings and acknowledged possibilities for improving culturally sensitive practice. The study also found that in most cases practitioners did not reflect on their own culture and possible biases. Additionally, findings suggest that practitioners sometimes held conflicting views regarding various related topics, which may have been constructed as a result of various expectations and discourses on diversity and early childhood education available to them.

The findings have important implications to policy and practice: even though the policy and curricular guidelines in Ireland devote much attention to the importance of addressing diversity in ECCE practice, practitioners may need further training to equip them with skills necessary for implementing more culturally meaningful practices and being open to views of families and communities, that might significantly differ from their own. Dialogue between practitioners and families with various cultural backgrounds is increasingly recognized to be a significant ethical endeavour, a starting point for cultural sharing and understanding (Di Gioia, 2013; Moss, 2007;

Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999; Brooker, 2005). In addition, findings suggests that some practitioners, might be more knowledgeable and skilful to address diversity issues in preschools, but not feel confident and empowered to bring forth a change. This finding has an implication for training as well as institutional support available to practitioners in order to be self-reflective and feel empowered and supported to bring forth change in the best interest of children. As argued by Ang (2010), training programs need to equip practitioners with skills to act as professionals locally and be able to creatively respond to local challenges within their ECCE settings.

6.2. Recommendations for further study

Despite the limited scope of this research project, it provides some important findings regarding practitioners' perspectives and experiences on cultural diversity in ECCE that can be further explored in future studies.

Firstly, it is suggested that the study of multiple perspectives on cultural diversity will provide richer evidence on the complex reality experienced by children, families and practitioners in increasingly multicultural society. Adair and Tobin (2008) emphasize the importance of hearing multiple perspectives in research on cultural diversity in ECCE. Giving the voice to practitioners, parents and children is critically important to ensure that everyone's voice is heard and considered. To this end Adair and Tobin (2008) suggest the research method that offers parents and practitioners to reflect on video recordings of practice in various preschools and share their opinions with other parents and practitioners. Along with parents and practitioners, children's perspectives need to be recognized and heard as they are the ones who personally experience many challenges that may be posed in culturally diverse ECCE communities. Children from various cultural backgrounds may be living in two significantly different cultural worlds in the family and in the preschool and their perspectives are critical to understanding these lived experiences (Brooker, 2005). Thomas (2012) emphasizes the importance of recognition of children's voice to ensuring practice adhering to principles of love, rights and solidarity.

The study has suggested that practitioners may adhere to views that are conflicting with their experiences. In future prolonged ethnographic research in ECCE settings could be carried out to study various factors that may be contributing to shaping conflicting views on various issues related to cultural diversity. Ethnographic study will allow for further depth in exploring how

practitioner's own identities, knowledge, relational, institutional and discursive factors interrelate to construct practitioners perspectives and consequently their practice in ECCE settings. Another significant aspect that may be explored within the framework of an ethnographic study relates to practitioners' sense of empowerment to bring forth change when they envision a need for it. This research in two Dublin preschools offers evidence that practitioners may hold critical views on various topics relevant to cultural diversity in ECCE, however might feel reluctant to act for change. Ethnographic research will allow for immersion in everyday life of the ECCE centre and generating rich data on obstacles that might be contributing to practitioners passive or active roles in making ECCE practices more culturally relevant and sensitive for all children and families.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Letter to the preschool principal

Dear principal,

I am a student on the International Masters Programme in Early Childhood Education and Care at the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT). This letter is to inform you about the research I am conducting as part of my studies and to kindly request participation of your early childhood education centre in this study. The goal of the research is to study early childhood practitioners' experiences of cultural diversity in early childhood care and education (ECCE) centres.

As Ireland has become increasingly culturally diverse, studying early years practitioners' experiences will enhance knowledge about the challenges and needs that they face in day-to-day practice. The study will involve interviewing four practitioners from two ECCE centres. The time and location for the interviews will be arranged according to the participants' wish. Before the interviews I would like to spend a morning or afternoon in each practitioner's group to observe the classroom environment, and to get an insight into the general activities and interactions within the group. During the observation period I will playfully interact with the children to reduce the uneasiness that may be caused by my presence.

The data acquired through the interviews and observations will be treated with utmost respect. All names of individual practitioners, children and locations will be changed in the study report and all records will be kept confidential and securely stored. The data will be used only for the given study and related publications afterwards. Participating practitioners will be given oral as well as written detailed information about the study in advance and will be asked to sign a consent form. The consent forms will include information on the study, considerations of anonymity and confidentiality and participants' right to withdraw from the research at any point without giving an explanation. Written information about the study will be given to all parents of children in the groups of selected practitioners. Parents will be kindly asked to notify the practitioner or the researcher if they do not wish their child to participate in the study. Before the observation children will be asked if they would like to be included in the study. Children, who express the wish not to participate, will not be observed.

In accordance with the general regulations regarding access to ECCE centres, I have Garda clearance and will present the document upon your request. If you would like to know further details about the study, I will be more than happy to provide you with additional information. You can contact me on my phone 0852043435 or email ana.janelidze@gmail.com.

I would kindly appreciate the participation of your early childhood education centre in this research project.

Yours sincerely,

Ana Janelidze, International Masters Student

School of Social Sciences and Law, Dublin Institute of Technology, 40-45 Mountjoy Square, Dublin 1

Supervisor: Dr. Mairead Seymour, School of Social Sciences and Law, Dublin Institute of Technology, 40-45 Mountjoy Square, Dublin 1. mairead.seymour@dit.ie or 01-4024133.

Appendix 2: Information letter about the research for practitioners

Dear Ms/Mr...

I am a student on the International Masters in Early Childhood Education and Care at the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT). As part of the terms of the programme, I am required to complete a research thesis. The purpose of my research is to study early childhood practitioners' experiences of cultural diversity in early childhood education and care centres in Dublin. I am interested in exploring early years practitioners' experience of multiculturalism in early childhood centres, how practitioners address issues posed by cultural diversity and what they have come to see as challenges and opportunities of multicultural early childhood education and care communities.

The study will involve two parts. At the initial stage I would like to observe the classroom environment, and to get an insight into the general activities and interactions within the group by spending a morning or afternoon in each practitioner's room. During the observation period I will try to reduce the uneasiness that may be caused to the children by presence of an unknown adult by consulting you beforehand and playfully interacting with children within the limits of ongoing activities. Thereafter I would like to interview you about your experiences and perspectives on diversity and multiculturalism in the early years setting. It is anticipated that the interview will take approximately 40 minutes. You may refrain from answering any particular question and can withdraw from the study at any point without providing an explanation. Withdrawal from the study will not affect your relationship with the Dublin Institute of Technology in the future.

I would like to use a digital recording device to ensure that I capture practitioners' views accurately. Any data gathered during the observations and interviews will be stored securely, treated confidentially and destroyed at the end of the research study. All the names of individuals and places will be changed to ensure anonymity. No documents, including draft, final thesis work or any publication of the study will include information that might make the participants identifiable.

In accordance with the general regulations regarding access to ECCE centres I have Garda clearance and will present the document upon your request. Every stage of the research will be carried out in accordance with the guidelines stipulated by the DIT Research Ethics Committee.

I would be very grateful if you would consider participating in this study as your input and experience would greatly contribute to enhancing knowledge in this area of practice.

If you have further questions about the study I will gladly provide you with the answers. You can contact me on my phone 0852043435 or email ana.janelidze@gmail.com.

Yours sincerely,

Ana Janelidze, MA Student

Dublin Institute of Technology

Supervisor: Dr. Mairead Seymour, School of Social Sciences and Law, Dublin Institute of Technology, 40-45 Mountjoy Square, Dublin 1 mairread.seymour@dit.ie / 01-4024133

Appendix 3: Consent form for practitioners

Researcher's Name: ANA JANELIDZE	Title:
Faculty/School/Department: DUBLIN INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY, FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES AND LAW, INTERNATIONAL MASTERS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE PROGRAMME (IMEC)	
Title of Study: Experiences and perspectives of practitioners in culturally diverse early childhood education and care centres in Ireland	
To be completed by the: Practitioner	
<p>3.1 Have you been fully informed/read the information sheet about this study? YES/NO</p> <p>3.2 Have you had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study? YES/NO</p> <p>3.3. Have you received satisfactory answers to all your questions? YES/NO</p> <p>3.4 Have you received enough information about this study and any associated health and safety implications if applicable? YES/NO</p> <p>3.5 Do you understand that you are free to withdraw from this study?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • at any time • without giving a reason for withdrawing • without affecting your future relationship with the Institute <p>YES/NO</p> <p>3.6 Do you agree to take part in this study the results of which are likely to be published? YES/NO</p> <p>3.7 Have you been informed that this consent form shall be kept in the confidence of the researcher? YES/NO</p>	
<p>Signed _____ Date _____</p> <p>Name in Block Letters _____</p> <p>Signature of Researcher _____ Date _____</p>	

Please note:

- For persons under 18 years of age the consent of the parents or guardians must be obtained or an explanation given to the Research Ethics Committee and the assent of the child/young person should be obtained to the degree possible dependent on the age of the child/young person. Please complete the Consent Form (section 4) for Research Involving 'Less Powerful' Subjects or those under 18 Yrs.
- In some studies, witnessed consent may be appropriate.
- The researcher concerned must sign the consent form after having explained the project to the subject and after having answered his/her questions about the project.

Appendix 4: Information letter to parents

Dear parent,

I am a student on the International Masters in Early Childhood Education and Care at the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT). As part of the terms of the programme, I am required to complete a research thesis. The purpose of my research is to study early childhood practitioners' experiences of cultural diversity in early childhood education and care centres in Dublin. I am interested in exploring early years practitioners' experience of multiculturalism in early childhood centres, how practitioners address issues posed by cultural diversity and what they have come to see as challenges and opportunities of multicultural early childhood education and care communities.

The study will involve two parts: classroom observation and interviews with practitioners. At the initial stage I would like to observe the classroom environment, and to get an insight into the general activities and interactions within the group by spending a morning or afternoon in each practitioner's room. I will not observe individual children and their behaviour and no data on individual children will be gathered. During the observation period I will take notes. To reduce the discomfort that might be caused by stranger's presence in the classroom I will try to playfully interact with children within the boundaries of the ongoing activities. Before the observations the practitioner will introduce me to the children and I will briefly explain to the children the aim of my presence and what I will do in the classroom (observing, taking notes). Children will be asked if they would like to be included in the study and if any of them express a wish not to, they will not be observed by the researcher.

Any data gathered during the observations will be stored securely, treated confidentially and destroyed at the end of the research study. All the names of individuals and places will be changed to ensure anonymity. No documents, including draft, final thesis work or any publication of the study will include information that might make the participants identifiable.

In accordance with the general regulations regarding access to ECCE centres I have Garda clearance and will present the document to the centre before the observation begins. Every stage of the research will be carried out in accordance with the guidelines stipulated by the DIT Research Ethics Committee.

I would be very grateful if you would notify your child's carer or me, about your decision to allow your child to take part in this study.

If you have further questions about the study I will gladly provide you with the answers. You can contact me on my phone 0852043435 or email ana.janelidze@gmail.com.

Yours sincerely,

Ana Janelidze

MA Student

Dublin Institute of Technology

Supervisor: Dr. Mairead Seymour, School of Social Sciences and Law, Dublin Institute of Technology, 40-45 Mountjoy Square, Dublin 1 mairiad.seymour@dit.ie / 01-4024133.

Appendix 5: Consent form for research involving ‘less powerful’ subjects or those under 18 years

Researcher's Name: ANA JANELIDZE	Title:
Faculty/School/Department: <i>School of Languages, Law and Society</i>	
Title of Study: Experiences and perspectives of practitioners in culturally diverse early childhood education and care centres in Ireland	
4.1 In what way, if any does the proposed study benefit the individual subject?	
The research aims to study ECEC practitioner's experiences and views of cultural diversity in Dublin. Increasing cultural diversity poses new challenges and opportunities for practitioners. Study of their experiences will contribute to enriching existing knowledge in the field and informing policy and practice for enhancing culturally responsive learning environments for all children in early childhood.	
4.2. Has parent's/guardian's consent to be obtained?	YES
If Yes, in what form - verbal, written, witnessed, etc.. – will consent be obtained. Please attach a copy of the relevant forms.	
Three hour observations will be carried out in each of the four practitioner's classes/groups. The aim of the observation is to gather data from the classroom environment and activities that are relevant to cultural diversity. The observations will focus only on activities and environment, not individual children's behaviour. An information sheet about the study will be given to each parent explaining the study and the researcher's presence for three hours in the class/group. The information sheet will be included in the child's daily diary for parents' attention (if available) or handed by the practitioner to the parent. Practitioners will also follow up with parents to ensure that they received the information sheet. Parents will be asked to notify the ECEC practitioner or the researcher if they do not wish the child to participate in the study.	
4.3. Will the child's or young person's assent be sought?	
YES	
Before the observation, the practitioner will introduce the researcher to the children and explain the reason for the researcher's presence. Children will be asked if they would like to be included in the study. Children, who express a wish not to participate, will not be included in the observation data.	
4.4. Are the risks of the investigation judged to be minimal or nil?	
YES	
Please attach a risk assessment form (form 10.i) if necessary	
The study does not involve any risks.	
Researcher's Signature ____Ana Janelidze_____	Title __M.Ed_____
Date __20/02/2014_____	

Appendix 6: Ethics form on subjects and/or researcher

Researcher's Name: <i>Ana Janelidze</i>	Title:
Faculty/School/Department: School of Languages, Law and Society	
Title of Study: Experiences and perspectives of practitioners in culturally diverse early childhood education and care centres in Ireland	
2.1 Please specify the types of subjects involved in this study, e.g. healthy subjects, in-patients, clinic attendees, minors, and indicate the number of each type. NB. Names of Student Subjects receiving payment in commercially sponsored research must be notified to the Research Ethics Committee. The study involves two types of subjects: ECEC practitioners and children attending ECEC centres. Four practitioners will be selected for the in-depth interviews. Three hour observations will be carried out in each of the four practitioner's classes/groups. The aim of the observation is to complement interview data with data from the classroom environment and activities that are relevant to cultural diversity. The observations will focus only on activities and environment, not individual children's behaviour. An information sheet about the study will be given to each parent explaining the study and the researcher's presence for three hours in the class/group. The information sheet will be included in the child's daily diary for parents' attention. Practitioners will also follow up with parents to ensure that they received the information sheet. Parents will be asked to notify the ECEC practitioner or the researcher if they do not wish the child to participate in the study. Before the observation, the practitioner will introduce the researcher to the children and explain the reason for the researcher's presence. Children will be asked if they would like to be included in the study. Children, who express a wish not to participate, will not be included in the observation data.	
2.2. How will you be recruiting subjects for the study? If controls are to be included please state how they are to be selected and attach a copy of the advertisement if used. Purposive sampling will be applied. At the first stage, agreement for participation will be sought from the managers of selected ECEC centres. At the second stage practitioners within the centres that agreed to participate will be offered to participate in the study. All children in the classrooms of these teachers will be considered for the observation, unless a child or his/her parent prefers not to be included in the study.	
2.3. Specify the number of subjects to be used in this project, the selection criteria and the exclusion criteria. Four practitioners will be selected for the study. To gather rich data only those practitioners will be asked to participate who have at least six months experience of working with children in from culturally diverse backgrounds in the early childhood education sector.	
2.4. Specify whether any of the following procedures are involved:	

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Any invasive procedure Physical contact Any procedure that may cause mental distress 	<p>NO</p> <p>NO</p> <p>NO</p>
<p>No invasive procedures will be involved in the study. However, as the study involves three hours of observation in each class, the presence of a researcher in the setting may be somewhat unsettling for the children. To reduce the possible uneasiness, the researcher will seek advice in advance from the practitioner, will introduce herself to the children and interact with them playfully and quietly throughout the observation.</p> <p>The researcher will provide the ECEC centre with her Garda clearance in accordance with the general regulations regarding access to the ECEC institutions.</p>	
<p>Outline the procedures involved in your study.</p> <p>(If samples are to be taken state type, frequency and amount and whether this is part of their normal treatment. If Radiological Investigations are part of the procedure please indicate the number and frequency of exposures and total calculated dosage.)</p>	
<p>The study will involve three hours of participant observation in each classroom and a 40 minute in –depth interviews with each practitioner. The researcher will observe the physical environment and activities relevant to cultural diversity. The acquired data will better inform the upcoming interviews with practitioners. Semi-structured open-ended interviews will be carried out with the participating practitioners during their preferred time and location (the ECEC centre or the DIT campus).</p>	
<p>2.5.State the procedures which may cause discomfort or distress and the degree of discomfort or distress likely to be endured by the subjects.</p>	
<p>The presence of a researcher in the classroom might cause slight discomfort for the practitioners and children. However, to reduce any discomfort the researcher will meet with the practitioner beforehand and provide him/her with detailed information about the study. In addition the researcher will be introduced to children and will playfully interact with them during the observation within the limits of ongoing daily activities.</p>	
<p>2.6.State the potential risks, if any (to both the investigator, subjects, the environment and/or participants), and the precautions being taken to meet them.</p> <p>Include information on hazardous substances that will be used or produced, and the steps being taken to reduce risks.</p> <p>For any projects using Ionizing Radiation see <u>SECTION 7</u>.</p> <p>It is a requirement that a formal signed Risk Assessment Form be provided-see <u>SECTION 10</u> (i) to (v)</p>	
<p><i>Proposed study does not involve any risks or hazards.</i></p>	
<p>2.7Is written consent to be obtained?</p> <p>YES</p> <p>If so, please use the CONSENT FORM (<u>section 3</u>)</p> <p><i>If a form other than the Research Ethical Committee consent form is to be used, please attach a copy.</i></p>	
<p>2.8. Are subjects to be included under the age of 18?</p> <p>YES</p> <p>If yes, please fill in the CONSENT FORM (<u>section 4</u>) for Research Involving ‘less powerful</p>	

Appendix 7: Fieldwork risk assessment form

14.1 Researcher Details	
Name (use block capitals): ANA JANELIDZE	
Title: Experiences and perspectives of practitioners in culturally diverse early childhood education and care centres in Ireland	
Faculty/ School/Department: School of Languages, Law and Society	
14.2 Location(s) of Work	
Early childhood care and education centres	
14.3 Title and Description of fieldwork	
Student research for Master's thesis	
Title of the study: Experiences and perspectives of practitioners in culturally diverse early childhood education and care centres in Ireland	
Fieldwork includes two stages: three hour observation of environment and activities in four ECEC classrooms during the daily activities and in-depth interviews with four practitioners.	
14.4 Proposed time-scale for completion of research	
Fieldwork will be carried out: From: March 20 To: April 11	
14.5 Hazards	
14.5.1 Physical hazards e.g. extreme weather; mountains and cliffs; quarries, marshes and quicksand; freshwater or seawater	RISK (High, medium, Low)
1. There are no physical hazards associated with the research	
14.5.2 Biological hazards E.g. Poisonous plants; aggressive animals; soil or water micro-organisms; insects.	RISK (High, medium, low)
1 There are no biological hazards associated with the research	
14.5.3 Chemical hazards E.g. pesticides; dusts; contaminated soils; chemicals brought	RISK

into site.	(High, medium, low)
1. There are no chemical hazards associated with the research	
14.5.4 Man-made hazards E.g. Electrical equipment; vehicles; insecure buildings; slurry pits; power and pipelines.	RISK (High, medium, low)
1. There are no man-made hazards associated with the research	
14.5.5 Personal safety e.g. lone working; attack on person or property	RISK (High, medium, low)
1. There are no personal safety risks associated with the study	
14.5.6 Environmental impact e.g. Rubbish; pollution; disturbance of eco-system	RISK (High, medium, low)
1. There will be no environmental impact	
14.5.7. Other Hazards (specify)	RISK (High, medium, low)
1. None	
14.5.8 Steps taken to minimise risks identified above e.g. procedures; equipment; clothing; skills training; information	
1. N/A	
14.6 Emergency procedures e.g. first aid; survival aids; communication	
1. N/A	
14.7 Sources of information used for this assessment	
1. N/A	

14.8 Have the following been arranged for? Please answer yes, no or not applicable (NA)	
1) Suitable travel arrangements and licensed drivers: Answer: NA 2) Adequate insurance cover: Answer: NA 3) Permission to work on site: Answer: (Permission will be obtained after ethics committee approval of the study) 4) Necessary training and information received: Answer: NA 5) Health and next of kin information given to field trip leader: Answer NA 6) Provision for disabilities, health problems: Answer NA	
14.9 Person(s) completing this assessment :	
Signature: __A.Janelidze_____ Print Name: __Ana Janelidze_____ Title: __M.Ed_____ Date: _27 Feb. 14_____	Signature: _____ Print Name: _____ Title: _____ Date: _____
14.10 Approved by Safety Officer (or Head of School)	
Signature: _____ Title: _____ _____ Print Name: _____ Date: _____	
14.11 Approved by Head of School	
Signature: _____ Title: _____ _____ Print Name: _____ Date: _____	

Appendix 8: Interview guide

Researcher: Ana Janelidze

Introduction

The researcher will shortly introduce herself to the participant and remind the participant of some of the important research related issues:

- The anticipated length of the interview is around 45 minutes.
- Interview questions will be about your experiences and perspectives on cultural diversity in early childhood education and care.
- If you don't mind, I will record (audio only) the interview and transcribe it later. This is to ensure that the data I record fully and accurately reflect your responses in my research. In addition, before proceeding to analysis of the gathered data, I will bring the detailed transcript of the interview for your review.
- I will handle the recording and the transcript with utmost care and keep it secure and confidential. I will destroy the recording and the transcript after completion of the study.
- To ensure your anonymity your name or other details that might identify you (e.g., school name or location) will not be mentioned anywhere in the study, final thesis or any article related to the study.
- You can withhold from responding to any particular question, if you prefer to do so.
- You can withdraw from the study at any point, without any consequences.
- If you have any questions about the interview or the research I'll gladly answer them.

1. Could you please tell me a little bit about your background in early childhood education, including qualifications, work experience and education?

Further probing questions if the information is lacking:

- How long have you worked in ECCE field?
- In what positions?
- Have you received training relevant to ECCE? Pre-service or in-service? FETAC level or degree level
- How long was the training program(s)?
- Have you received any specific training (pre-service, in-service) on diversity and equality issues? If yes, what topics did the training cover?
- Overall, how satisfied are you with the training that you have undergone?

2. What does 'cultural diversity' in early childhood mean for you in general?

Further probing questions if the information is lacking:

- Which individuals/groups make up 'culturally diverse' ECEC community in Ireland? In this setting?
- How important is it to address issues pertaining to cultural diversity in ECEC? Why?
- Which cultures are relevant for addressing in your ECCE setting?

- What is the role of the teacher when addressing cultural diversity issues in ECCE?
- 3. What is the school policy (if any) and practice on diversity and equality and specifically cultural diversity?**
- Further probing questions if the information is lacking:*
- What are some of the major issues in the policy?
 - Who has participated in the development of the policy?
 - Do you think the policy addresses all issues that are important in regards to cultural diversity?
 - Do you like how the policy is implemented?
 - Are there other documents/ guidelines that you use to inform your practice in culturally diverse setting?
 - Areas for improvement in the policy?
 - How does the culture/everyday practice in the setting position itself towards diversity? (e.g., relationships among staff members, staff member and children and families).
- 4. Based on your experience, could you describe the activities (e.g., planned activities, routines, spontaneous situations, ‘teachable moments’, etc) in everyday life of the setting which you have used for addressing different issues pertaining to children and families from various cultural backgrounds.**
- Further probing questions if the information is lacking:*
- What aspects of cultural diversity have you addressed?
 - What resources have you used to promote cultural diversity?
 - (Observation notes will be used for probing)
- 5. Can you tell me about some of the difficulties or challenges you have experienced as a practitioner in a culturally diverse ECEC community?**
- Further probing questions if the information is lacking:*
- What type of difficulties?
 - How did you address them?
 - How were other stakeholders involved: children, families, other practitioners, other community members?
- 6. Can you talk about your experience of working with families of diverse cultural backgrounds?**
- Further probing questions if the information is lacking:*
- How frequently do you communicate with families of all children?
 - Are there any differences in the communication patterns (e.g., frequency, reciprocity, feedback on child’s well-being and development) between you and families with different cultural backgrounds?

7. Could you compare your beliefs and attitudes towards groups/individuals with culturally diverse backgrounds before you had experience with working with them and now?

Further probing questions if the information is lacking:

- Have your ideas changed or stayed the same?
- If they have changed, in what way?

8. What are some of the things that can be done to ensure better opportunities for children from diverse cultural backgrounds in your setting?

Further probing questions if the information is lacking:

- Do you think there is a need for further training for practitioners? If yes, on what topics?
- Is there a need for more resources?
- Do you think there is enough collaboration on relevant issues within or between schools?

9. Would like to add anything else?

Thank you very much for participating in the study. As we agreed, I will provide you with the transcript of this interview before using it in the data analysis.

Appendix 9: Observation guide

Classroom environment observation

Detailed description of the materials/images/resources should be provided under each sub-section

Images in the environment

- Are there images of all the children, families and staff in the classroom?
- If classroom is ethnically/culturally homogenous, are there images of children and adults from different communities in Ireland?
- Are there images that accurately reflect people's current daily lives in Ireland?
- Is there a numerical balance among images of culturally different groups?
- Are there images of different family types (e.g., multi-ethnic)?
- Are there artworks by artists of various backgrounds that reflect the culture of the families represented in the classroom or in general in Ireland?

Books

- Do the books reflect diversity of cultural backgrounds?
- Do the books present accurate images and information?
- Do the books show people from all groups living their daily lives (working, being with family, solving issues relevant to young children, having celebrations)?
- Are there books about contemporary life in Ireland?
- Do the books depict a variety of children and families within a group (are there a few books about each culture represented in the setting)?
- Do the books reflect different languages children speak in the setting (or at home): e.g., alphabet books and stories in different languages?

Dramatic play

- Are there materials that reflect cultural diversity (e.g., cooking, eating, objects, work tools and clothes, objects used for holiday celebrations)?

Language

- Are there opportunities in the environment for children to see and hear various languages? (e.g., labelled materials (blocks, puzzles), alphabet and number posters, books, story tapes, songs)

Music

- Does the regularly heard music reflect various cultural styles of the children and staff as well as other groups in Ireland? (e.g., singing, background music, music for movement and dancing, lullabies and naptimes) If there are no CDs or other records in the class and

websites or other computer resources are used for music, this question will be asked during the interview.

Art Materials

- Are there different colours (skin tone colours: tan, brown, black, etc.) of paint, crayons, play-dough, etc.?

Dolls

- Are there bought and/or home-made dolls that represent a balance of all the major groups in Ireland (Do they look authentic?)
- Are there any Persona dolls?

Manipulatives

- Are there manipulative materials depicting diversity in ethnicity/culture/occupations (e.g., puzzles, LEGO, PLAYMOBIL, family and community helper figures, lotto games and card games, etc.)?

Observation of interactions and activities

Any relevant information should be recorded under each topic.

1. Do teachers pick up on nonverbal and verbal expression of interest as quickly with children of different cultural backgrounds?
2. Do teacher “over-help” or overprotect children who are different in some way from “the average child”?
3. Are similar behaviours interpreted and responded to similarly or differently with children from different cultural background?
4. When children refer to some aspect of cultural difference, how does the teacher react?
5. Are all children supported in their preferred learning styles and also encouraged to try new ways of interacting with people and materials?
6. Are there cultural themes integrated in the planned activities?
7. Are the culturally relevant materials/toys used? How?